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THE KILLER

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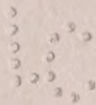
STEWART EDWARD WHITE

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STEWART EDWARD WHITE

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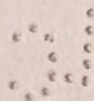


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THE KILLER

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CHAPTER I

I want to state right at the start that I am writing this story twenty years after it happened solely because my wife and Señor Buck Johnson insist on it. Myself, I don't think it a good yarn. It hasn't any love story in it; and there isn't any plot. Things just happened, one thing after the other. There ought to be a yarn in it somehow, and I suppose if a fellow wanted to lie a little he could make a tail-twister out of it. Anyway, here goes; and if you don't like it, you know you can quit at any stage of the game.

It happened when I was a kid and didn't know any better than to do such things. They dared me to go up to Hooper's Ranch and stay all night; and as I had no information on either the ranch or its owner, I saddled up and went. It was only twelve miles from our Box Springs ranch—a nice easy ride. I should explain that heretofore I had ridden the Gila end of our ranges, which is so far away that only vague rumours of Hooper had ever reached me at all. He was reputed a tough old devil, with horrid habits; but that meant little to me. The tougher and horridier they came, the better they suited me—so I thought. Just to make everything entirely clear I will add that this was in the year of 1897 and the Soda Springs valley in Arizona.

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By these two facts you old-timers will gather the setting of my tale. Indian days over; "nester" days with frame houses and vegetable patches not yet here. Still a few guns packed for business purposes; Mexican border handy; no railroad in to Tombstone yet; cattle rustlers lingering in the Galiuros; train holdups and homicide yet prevalent but frowned upon; favourite tippie whiskey toddy with sugar;—but the old fortified ranches all gone, longhorns crowded out by shorthorn glaze-head Herfords or near-Herfords, some indignation against Alfred Henry Lewis's *Wolfville* as a base libel;—and, also but, no gasoline wagons or pumps, no white collar, no tourists pervading the desert, and the Injins still wearing blankets and overalls at their reservations instead of bead work on the railway platforms when the Overland goes through. In other words, we were wild and wooly, but sincerely didn't know it.

While I was saddling up to go take my dare old Jed Parker came and leaned himself up against the snubbing post of the corral. He watched me for a while, and I kept quiet, knowing well enough that he had something to say.

"Know Hooper?" he asked.

"I've seen him driving by," said I.

I had: a little humped insignificant figure with close cropped white hair beneath a huge hat. He drove all hunched up. His buckboard was a rattletrap old insulting challenge to every little stone in the road; but there was nothing the matter with the horses or their harness. We never held much with grooming in Arizona, but these beasts shone like bronze. Good sizeable horses, clean built—well, I better not get started talking horse! They're the reason I had

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never really sized up the old man the few times I'd passed him.

"Well, he's a tough bird," said Jed.

"Looks like a harmless old cuss—but mean," says I.

"About this trip," said Jed, after I'd saddled and coiled my rope—"don't, and say you did."

I didn't answer this, but led my horse to the gate.

"Well, don't say as how I didn't tell you all about it," said Jed, going back to the bunk house.

Miserable old coot! I suppose he thought he *had* told me all about it! Jed was always too loquacious!

But I hadn't racked along more than two miles before a man cantered up who was perfectly able to express himself. He was one of our outfit and was known as Windy Bill. Nuff said!

"Hear you're goin' up to stay the night at Hoopers," said he. "Know Hooper?"

"No, I don't," said, I, "are you another of these Sunbirds with glad news?"

"Know about Hooper's boomerang?"

"Boomerang!" I replied, "what's that?"

"That's what they call it. You know how of course we all let each other's strays water at our troughs in this country, and send 'em back to the range at round up."

"Brother, you interest me," said I, "and would you mind informing me further how you tell the dear little cows apart?"

"Well, old Hooper don't, that's all," went on Windy, without paying me any attention. "He built him a chute leading to the water corrals, and half way down the chute he

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built a gate that would swing across it and open a hole into a dry corral. And he had a high platform with a handle that ran the gate. When any cattle but those of his own brands came along, he had a man swing the gate and they landed up into the dry corral. By and by he let them out on the range again."

"Without water?"

"Sure! And of course back they came into the chute. And so on. Till they died, or we came along and drove them back home."

"Windy," said I, "you're stuffing me full of tacks."

"I've seen little calves lyin' in heaps against the fence like drifts of tumbleweed," said Windy soberly; and then added, without apparent passion, "The old——!"

Looking at Windy's face, I knew these words for truth.

"He's a bad *hombre*," resumed Windy Bill after a moment. "He never does no actual killing himself, but he's got a bad lot, of oilers* there, especially an old one named Andreas and another one called Ramon, and all he has to do is to lift one eye at a man he don't like and that man is as good as dead—one time or another."

This was going it pretty strong, and I grinned at Windy Bill.

"All right," said Windy, "I'm just telling you."

"Well, what's the matter with you fellows down here?" I challenged. "How is it he's lasted so long? Why hasn't someone shot him? Are you all afraid of him, or his Mexicans?"

"No, it ain't that, exactly. I don't know. He drives by

*Oiler = Greaser = Mexican.

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all alone, and he don't pack no gun ever, and he's sort of runty—and,—I do' no *why* he ain't been shot, but he ain't. And if I was you, I'd stick home."

Windy amused but did not greatly persuade me. By this time I was fairly conversant with the cowboy's sense of humour. Nothing would have tickled them more than to bluff me out of a harmless excursion, by means of scareful tales. Shortly Windy Bill turned off to examine a distant bunch of cattle; and so I rode on alone.

It was coming on toward evening. Against the eastern mountains were floating tinted mists; and the cañons were a deep purple. The cattle were moving slowly so that here and there a nimbus of dust caught and reflected the late sunlight into gamboge yellows and mauves. The magic time was near when the fierce implacable day-genius of the desert would fall asleep and the soft, gentle, beautiful star-eyed night-genius of the desert would arise and move softly. My pony racked along in the desert. The mass that represented Hooper's ranch drew imperfectly nearer. I made out the green of trees and the white of walls and building.

CHAPTER II

Hooper's ranch proved to be entirely enclosed by a wall of adobe ten feet high and whitewashed. To the outside it presented a blank face. Only corrals and an alfalfa patch were not included. A wide high gateway, that could be closed by massive doors, let into a stable yard, and seemed to be the only entrance. The buildings within were all immaculate also: evidently Old Man Hooper loved whitewash. Cottonwood trees showed their green heads; and to the right I saw the sloped shingled roof of a larger building. Not a living creature was in sight. I shook myself, saying that the undoubted sinister feeling of utter silence and lifelessness was compounded of my expectations and the time of day. But that did not satisfy me. My aroused mind, casting about, soon struck it: I was missing the swarms of blackbirds, linnets, purple finches, and doves that made our own ranch trees vocal. Here were no birds. Laughing at this simple explanation of my eerie feeling, I passed under the gate and entered the courtyard.

It, too, seemed empty. A stable occupied all one side; the other three were formed by bunk houses and necessary out-buildings. Here, too, dwelt absolute solitude and absolute silence. It was uncanny, as though one walked in a vacuum. Everything was neat and shut up and whitewashed and apparently dead. There were no sounds or signs of occu-

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pancy. I was as much alone as though I had been in the middle of an ocean. My mind, by now abnormally sensitive and alert, leaped on this idea. For the same reason, it insisted,—lack of life: there are no birds here, not even *flies*! Of course, said I, gone to bed in the cool of evening: why should there be? I laughed aloud and hushed suddenly; and then nearly jumped out of skin. The thin blue curl of smoke had caught my eye; and I became aware of the figure of a man seated on the ground, in the shadow, leaning against the building. The curl of smoke was from his cigarette. He was wrapped in a *serape* which blended well with the cool color of shadow. My eyes were dazzled with the whitewash—natural enough—yet the impression of solitude had been so complete—; it was uncanny, as though he had materialized out of the shadow itself. Silly idea! I ranged my eye along the row of houses, and I saw three other figures I had missed before, all broodingly immobile, all merged in shadow, all watching me, all with the insubstantial air of having as I looked taken body from thin air.

This was too foolish! I dismounted, dropped my horse's reins over his head and sauntered to the nearest figure. He was lost in the dusk of the building and of his Mexican hat. I saw only the gleam of eyes.

“Where will I find Mr. Hooper?” I asked.

The figure waved a long slim hand toward a wicket gate in one side of the enclosure. He said no word, nor made another motion; and the other figures sat as though graven from stone.

After a moment's hesitation I pushed open the wicket

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gate, and so found myself in a smaller intimate courtyard of most surprising character. Its centre was green grass, and about its border grew tall bright flowers. A wide verandah ran about three sides. I could see that in the numerous windows hung white lace curtains. Mind you, this was in Arizona of the 'nineties!

I knocked at the nearest door, and after an interval it opened and I stood face to face with Old Man Hooper himself.

He proved to be as small as I had thought, not taller than my own shoulder, with a bent little figure dressed in wrinkled and baggy store clothes of a snuff brown. His bullet head had been cropped so that his hair stood up like a short-bristled white brush. His rather round face was brown and lined. His hands, which grasped the doorposts uncompromisingly to bar the way, were lean and veined and old. But all that I found in my recollections afterwards to be utterly unimportant. His eyes were his predominant, his formidable, his compelling characteristic. They were round, the pupils very small, the irises large and of a light flecked blue. From the pupils radiated fine lines. The blank cold inscrutable stare of them bored me through to the back of the neck. I suppose the man winked occasionally, but I never got that impression. I've noticed that owls have this same intent unwinking stare—and wild cats.

"Mr. Hooper," said I, "can you keep me over night?"

It was a usual request in the old cattle country. He continued to stare at me for some moments.

"Where are you from?" he asked at length. His voice was soft and low; rather purring.

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I mentioned our headquarters on the Gila: it did not seem worth while to say anything about Box Springs only a dozen miles away. He stared at me for some time more.

"Come in," he said abruptly; and stood aside.

This was a disconcerting surprise. All I had expected was permission to stop, and a direction as to how to find the bunk house. Then a more or less dull evening, and a return the following day to collect on my "dare." I stepped into the dimness of the hallway: and immediately after into a room beyond.

Again I must remind you that this was the Arizona of the 'nineties. All the ranch houses with which I was acquainted, and I knew about all of them, were very crudely done. They comprised generally a half dozen rooms with adobe walls and rough board floors, with only such furnishings as deal tables, benches, homemade chairs, perhaps a battered old washstand or so, and bunks filled with straw. We had no such things as tablecloths and sheets, of course. Everything was on a like scale of simple utility.

All right, get that in your mind. The interior into which I now stepped, with my clanking spurs, my rattling *chaps*, the dust of my sweat-stained garments, was a low ceilinged dim abode with faint musty aromas. Carpets covered the floors; an old fashioned hat rack flanked the door on one side, a tall clock on the other. I saw in passing framed steel engravings. The room beyond contained easy chairs, a sofa upholstered with hair cloth, an upright piano, a marble fireplace with a mantel, in a corner a three cornered what-not filled with objects. It too was dim and curtained and faintly aromatic as had been the house of an old maiden

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aunt of my childhood, who used to give me cookies on the Sabbath. I felt now too large, and too noisy, and altogether mis-dressed and blundering and dirty. The little old man moved without a sound and the grandfather's clock outside ticked deliberately in a hollow silence.

I sat down, rather gingerly, in the chair he indicated for me.

"I shall be very glad to offer you hospitality for the night," he said, as though there had been no interim. "I feel honoured at the opportunity."

I murmured my thanks, and a suggestion that I should look after my horse.

"Your horse, sir, has been attended to, and your *cantinas** are undoubtedly by now in your room, where, I am sure, you are anxious to repair."

He gave no signal, nor uttered any command, but at his last words a grave elderly Mexican appeared noiseless at my elbow. As a matter of fact he came through as unnoticed door at the back, but he might as well have materialized from the thin air for the start that he gave me. Hooper instantly arose.

"I trust, sir, you will find all to your liking. If anything is lacking, I trust you will at once indicate the fact. We shall dine in a half hour——"

He seized a small implement consisting of a bit of wire screen attached to the end of a short stick, darted across the room with the most extraordinary agility, thwacked a lone house fly, and returned.

"—And you will undoubtedly be ready for it," he finished

* Saddle pockets that fit on the pommel.

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his speech calmly, as though he had not moved from his tracks.

I murmured my acknowledgements. My last impression as I left the room was of the baleful dead challenging stare of the man's wild cat eyes.

The Mexican glided before me. We emerged into the court, walked along the verandah, and entered a bedroom. My guide slipped by me and disappeared before I had the chance of a word with him. He may have been dumb for all I know. I sat down and tried to take stock.

CHAPTER III

The room was small, but it was papered, it was rugged, its floor was painted and waxed, its window—opening into the court, by the way,—was hung with chintz and net curtain, its bed was garnished with sheets and counterpane, its chairs were upholstered and in perfect repair and polish. It was not Arizona, emphatically not, but rather the sweet and garnished and lavendered respectability of a Connecticut village. My dirty old *cantinas* lay stacked against the washstand. At sight of them I had to grin. Of course I travelled cowboy fashion. They contained a tooth brush, a comb, and a change of underwear. The latter item was sheer rank pride of caste.

It was all most incongruous and strange. But the strangest part, of course, was the fact that I found myself where I was at that moment. Why was I thus received? Why was I, an ordinary and rather dirty cowpuncher, not sent as usual to the men's bunk house? It could not be possible that Old Man Hooper extended this sort of hospitality to every chance wayfarer. Arizona is a democratic country, Lord knows: none more so! But owners are not likely to invite in strange cowboys unless they themselves mess with their own men. I gave it up, and tried unsuccessfully to shrug it off my mind, and sought distraction in looking about me. There was not much to see. The one door and one

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window opened into the court. The other side was blank except that near the ceiling ran a curious long narrow opening closed by a transom-like sash. I had never seen anything quite like it, but concluded that it must be a sort of loop hole for musketry in the old days. Probably they had some kind of scaffold to stand on.

I pulled off my shirt and took a good wash: shook the dust out of my clothes as well as I could; removed my spurs and *chaps*; knotted my silk handkerchief necktie fashion; slicked down my wet hair, and tried to imagine myself decently turned out for company. I took off my gun belt also; but after some hesitation thrust the revolver inside the waistband of my drawers. Had no reason; simply the border instinct to stick to one's weapon.

Then I sat down to wait. The friendly little noises of my own movements left me. I gave you my word, never before nor since have I experienced such stillness. In vain I told myself that with adobe walls two feet thick, a windless evening, and an hour after sunset stillness was to be expected. That did not satisfy. Silence is made up of a thousand little noises so accustomed that they pass over the consciousness. Somehow these little noises seemed to lack, I sat in an aural vacuum. This analysis has come to me since. At that time I only knew that most uneasily I missed something; and that my ears ached from vain listening.

At the end of the half hour I returned to the parlour. Old Man Hooper was there waiting. A hanging lamp had been lighted. Out of the shadows cast from it a slender figure rose and came forward.

"My daughter, Mr.——" he paused.

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"Sanborn," I supplied.

"My dear, Mr. Sanborn has most kindly dropped in to relieve the tedium of our evening with his company—his distinguished company." He pronounced the words suavely, without a trace of sarcastic emphasis, yet somehow I felt my face flush. And all the time he was staring at me blankly with his wide unblinking wild-cat eyes.

The girl was very pale, with black hair, and wide eyes under fair wide brow. She was simply dressed in some sort of white stuff. I thought she drooped a little. She did not look at me, nor speak to me; only bowed slightly.

We went at once into a dining room at the end of the little dark hall. It was lighted by a suspended lamp that threw the illumination straight down on a table perfect in its appointments of napery, silver, and glass. I felt very awkward and dusty in my cowboy rig; and rather too large. The same Mexican served us, deftly. We had delightful food, well cooked. I do not remember what it was. My attention was divided between the old man and his daughter. He talked, urbanely, of a wide range of topics, displaying a cosmopolitan taste, employing a choice of words and phrases that was astonishing. The girl, who turned out to be very pretty in a dark, pale, sad way, never raised her eyes from her plate.

It was the cool of the evening, and a light breeze from the open window swung the curtains. From the blackness outside a single frog began to chirp. My host's flow of words eddied, ceased. He raised his head uneasily; then, without apology, slipped from his chair and glided from the room. The Mexican remained; standing bolt upright in the dimness.

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For the first time the girl spoke. Her voice was low and sweet, but either I or my aroused imagination 'detected' a strained under quality.

"Ramon," she said in Spanish, "I am chilly. Close the window."

The servant turned his back to obey. With a movement rapid as a snake's dart the girl's hand came from beneath the table, reached across and thrust into mine a small folded paper. The next instant she was back in her place, staring down as before in apparent apathy. So amazed was I that I recovered barely soon enough to conceal the paper before Ramon turned back from his errand.

The next five minutes were to me hours of strained and bewildered waiting. I addressed one or two remarks to my companion, but received always monosyllabic answers. Twice I caught the flash of lanterns beyond the darkened window; and a subdued confused murmur as though several people were walking about stealthily. Except for this the night had again fallen deathly still. Even the cheerful frog had hushed.

At the end of a period my host returned, and without apology or explanation resumed his seat and took up his remarks where he had left them.

The girl disappeared somewhere between the table and the sitting room. Old Man Hooper offered me a cigar, and sat down deliberately to entertain me. I had an uncomfortable feeling that he was also amusing himself, as though I were being played with and covertly sneered at. Hooper's politeness and suavity concealed, and well concealed, a bitter irony. His manner was detached and a little pre-

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cise. Every few moments he burst into a flurry of activity with the fly whacker, darting here and there as his eyes fell upon one of the insects; but returning always calmly to his discourse with an air of never having moved from his chair. He talked to me of Praxiteles, among other things. What should an Arizona cowboy know of Praxiteles? and why should anyone talk to him of that worthy Greek save as a subtle and hidden expression of contempt? That was my feeling. My senses and mental apperceptions were by now a little on the raw.

That, possibly, is why I noticed the very first chrip of another frog outside. It continued, and I found myself watching my host covertly. Sure enough, after a few repetitions I saw subtle signs of uneasiness, of divided attention; and soon, again without apology or explanation, he glided from the room. And at the same instant the old Mexican servitor came and pretended to fuss with the lamps.

My curiosity was now thoroughly aroused, but I could guess no means of satisfying it. Like the bedroom, this parlour gave out only on the interior court. The flash of lanterns against the ceiling above reached me. All I could do was to wander about looking at the objects in the cabinet and the pictures on the walls. There was, I remember, a set of carved ivory chessmen and an engraving of the legal trial of some English worthy of the seventeenth century. But my hearing was alert, and I thought to hear footsteps outside. At any rate the chirp of the frog came to an abrupt end.

Shortly my host returned and took up his monologue.

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It amounted to that. He seemed to delight in choosing unusual subjects and then backing me into a corner with an array of well considered phrases that allowed me no opening for reply nor even comment. In one of my desperate attempts to gain even a momentary initiative I asked him, apropos of the piano, whether his daughter played.

"Do you like music?" he added, and without waiting for a reply seated himself at the instrument.

He played to me for half an hour. I do not know much about music; but I know he played well and that he played good things. Also that, for the first time, he came out of himself, abandoned himself to feeling. His close-cropped head swayed from side to side; his staring wildcat eyes half closed——

He slammed shut the piano and arose, more drily precise than ever.

"I imagine all that is rather beyond your apperceptions," he remarked, "and that you are ready for your bed. Here is a short document I would have you take to your room for perusal. Good night."

He tendered me a small folded paper which I thrust into the breast pocket of my shirt along with the note handed me earlier in the evening by the girl. Thus dismissed I was only too delighted to repair to my bedroom.

There I first carefully drew together the curtains; then examined the first of the papers I drew from my pocket. It proved to be the one from the girl, and read as follows:

"I am here against my will. I am not this man's daughter, For God's sake if you can help me, do so. But be careful for

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he is a dangerous man. My room is the last one on the left wing of the court. I am constantly guarded. I do not know what you can do. The case is hopeless. I cannot write more. I am watched."

I unfolded the paper Hooper himself had given me. It was similar in appearance to the other, and read:

"I am held a prisoner. This man Hooper is not my father but he is vindictive and cruel and dangerous. Beware for yourself. I live in the last room in the left wing. I am watched, so cannot write more."

The handwriting of the two documents was the same. I stared at one paper and then at the other, and for an half hour I thought all the thoughts appropriate to the occasion. They led me no where, and would not interest you.

CHAPTER IV

After a time I went to bed, but not to sleep. I placed my gun under my pillow, locked and bolted the door, and arranged a string cunningly across the open window so that an intruder—unless he had extraordinary luck—could not have failed to kick up a devil of a clatter. I was young, bold, without nerves; so that I think I can truthfully say I was not in the least frightened. But I cannot deny I was nervous—or rather the whole situation was on my nerves. I lay on my back staring straight at the ceiling. I caught myself gripping the sheets and listening. Only there was nothing to listen to. The night was absolutely still. There were no frogs, no owls, no crickets even. The firm old adobe walls gave off no creak nor snap of timbers. The world was muffled—I almost said smothered. The psychological effect was that of blank darkness, the black darkness of far underground; although the moon was sailing the heavens.

How long that lasted I could not tell you. But at last the silence was broken by the cheerful chirp of a frog. Never was sound more grateful to the ear! I lay drinking it in as thirstily as water after a day on the desert. It seemed that the world breathed again, was coming alive after syncope. And then beneath that loud and cheerful singing I became aware of duller half heard movements; and a moment or so later yellow lights began to flicker through the

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transom high at the blank wall of the room, and to reflect in wavering patches on the ceiling. Evidently somebody was afoot outside with a lantern.

I crept from the bed, moved the table beneath the transom, and climbed atop. The opening was still a foot or so above my head. Being young, strong and active, I drew myself up by the strength of my arms so I could look—until my muscles gave out!

I saw four men with lanterns moving here and there among some willows that bordered what seemed to be an irrigating ditch with water. They were armed with long clubs. Old Man Hooper in an overcoat stood in a commanding position. They seemed to be searching. Suddenly from a clump of bushes one of the men uttered an exclamation of triumph. I saw his long club rise and fall. At that instant my tired fingers slipped from the ledge and I had to let myself drop to the table. When a moment later I regained my vantage point, I found that the whole crew had disappeared.

Nothing more happened that night. At times I dozed in a broken sort of fashion, but never actually fell into sound sleep. The nearest I came to slumber was just at dawn. I really lost all consciousness of my surroundings and circumstances, and was only slowly brought to myself by the sweet singing of innumerable birds in the willows outside the blank wall. I lay in a half stupor enjoying them. Abruptly their music ceased. I heard the soft flat *spat* of a miniature rifle. The sound was repeated. I climbed back on my table and drew myself again to a position of observation.

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Old Man Hooper, armed with a .22 calibre rifle, was prowling along the willows in which fluttered a small band of migratory birds. He was just drawing bead on a robin. At the report the bird fell. The old man darted forward with the impetuosity of a boy, although the bird was dead. An impulse of contempt curled my lips. The old man was childish! Why should he find pleasure in hunting such harmless creatures? and why should he take on triumph over retrieving such petty game! But when he reached the fallen bird he did not pick it up for a possible pot-pie as I thought he would do. He ground it into the soft earth with the heel of his boot, stamping on the poor thing again and again. And never have I seen on human countenance such an expression of satisfied malignity!

I went to my door and looked out. You may be sure that the message I had received from the unfortunate young lady had not been forgotten; but Old Man Hooper's cynical delivery of the second paper had rendered me too cautious to undertake anything without proper reconnaissance. The left wing about the courtyard seemed to contain two apartments—at least there were two doors, each with its accompanying window. The window farthest out was heavily barred. My thrill at this discovery was, however, slightly dashed by the further observation that also all the other windows into the courtyard were barred. Still, that was peculiar in itself, and not attributable—as were the walls and remarkable transoms—to former necessities of defence. My first thought was to stroll idly around the courtyard, thus obtaining a closer inspection. But the moment I stepped into the open a Mexican sauntered into

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view and began to water the flowers. I can say no more than that in his hands that watering pot looked fairly silly. So I turned to the right and passed through the wicket gate and into the stable yard. It was natural enough that I should go to look after my own horse.

The stable yard was for the moment empty; but as I walked across it one of its doors opened and a very little wizened old man emerged leading a horse. He tied the animal to a ring in the wall and proceeded at once to currying.

I had been in Arizona for ten years. During that time I had seen a great many very fine native horses, for the stock of that country is directly descended from the barbs of the *conquistadores*. But, though often well formed and as tough and useful as horseflesh is made, they were small. And no man thought of refinements in caring for any one of his numerous mounts. They went shaggy or smooth according to the season; and not one of them could have called a curry comb or brush out of its name.

The beast from which the wizened old man stripped a *bone fide* horse blanket was none of these. He stood a good sixteen hands; his head was small and clean cut with large intelligent eyes and little well-set ears; his long muscular shoulders sloped forward as shoulders should; his barre was long and deep and well ribbed up; his back was flat and straight; his legs were clean and—what was rarely seen in the cow country—well proportioned—the cannon bone shorter than the leg bone, the ankle sloping and long and elastic—in short a magnificent creature whose points of excellence appeared one by one under close scrutiny.

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And the high lights of his glossy coat flashed in the sun like water.

I walked from one side to the other of him marvelling. Not a defect, not even a blemish could I discover. The animal was fairly a perfect specimen of horseflesh. And I could not help speculating as to its use. Old Man Hooper had certainly never appeared with it in public; the fame of such a beast would have spread the breadth of the country.

During my inspection the wizened little man continued his work without even a glance in my direction. He had on riding breeches, and leather gaiters, a plaid waistcoat and a peaked cap; which, when you think of it, was to Arizona about as incongruous as the horse. I made several conventional remarks of admiration, to which he paid not the slightest attention. But I know a bait.

"I suppose you claim him as a Morgan," said I.

"Claim, is it!" grunted the little man contemptuously.

"Well the Morgan is not a real breed anyway," I persisted. "A sixty-fourth blood will get one registered. What does that amount to!"

The little man grunted again.

"Besides, though your animal is a good one, he is too short and straight in the pasterns," said I, uttering sheer rank wild heresy.

After that we talked; at first heatedly, then argumentively, then with entire enthusiastic agreement. I saw to that. Allowing yourself to be converted from an absurd opinion is always a sure way to favour. We ended with antiphonies of praise for this descendant of Justice Morgan.

"You're the only man in all this God forsaken country

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that has the sense of a Shanghai rooster!" cried the little man in a glow. "They ride horses and they know naught of them; and they laugh at a horseman! Your hand, sir!" He shook it. "And is that your horse in number four! I wondered! He's the first animal I've seen here properly shod. They use the rasp, sir, on the outside the hoof, and on the clinches, sir; and they turn a seat for the shoe; and they pare out the sole and trim the frog—bah! You shoe your own horse, I take it. That's right and proper! Your hand again, sir. Your horse has been fed this hour ago."

"I'll water him, then," said I.

But when I led him forth I could find no trough or other facilities until the little man led me to a corner of the corral and showed me a contraption with a close fitting lid to be lifted.

"Its along of the flies," he explained to me. "They must drink, and we starve them for water here, and they go greedy for their poison yonder." He indicated flat dished full of liquid set on shelves here and about. "We keep them pretty clear."

I walked over, curiously to examine. About and in the dishes were literally quarts of dead insects, not only flies, but bees, hornets and other sorts as well. I now understood the deadly silence that had so impressed me the evening before. This was certainly most ingenious; and I said so.

But at my first remark the old man became obstinately silent, and fell again to grooming the Morgan horse. Then I became aware that he was addressing me in low tones out of the corner of his mouth.

"Go on; look at the horse; say something," he muttered,

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busily polishing down the animal's hind legs. "You're a man who *saveys* a horse—the only man I've seen here who does. *Get out!* Don't ask why. You're safe now. You're not safe here another day. Water your horse; eat your breakfast; then *get out!*"

And not another word did I extract. I watered my horse at the covered trough; and rather thoughtfully returned to the courtyard.

I found there Old Man Hooper waiting. He looked as bland and innocent and harmless as the sunlight on his own flagstones—until he gazed up at me, and then I was as usual disconcerted by the blank veiled unwinking stare of his eyes.

"Remarkably fine Morgan stallion you have, sir," I greeted him. "I didn't know such a creature existed in this part of the world."

But the little man displayed no gratification.

"He's well enough. I have him more to keep Tim happy than anything else. We'll go in to breakfast."

I cast a cautious eye at the barred window in the left wing. The curtains were still down. At the table I ventured to ask after Miss Hooper. The old man stared at me up to the point of embarrassment; then replied drily that she always breakfasted in her room. The rest of our conversation was on general topics. I am bound to say it was unexpectedly easy. The old man was a good talker; and possessed social ease and a certain charm, which he seemed to be trying to exert. Among other things, I remember, he told me of the Indian Councils he used to hold in the old days.

"They were held on the willow flat; outside the east

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wall," he said. "I never allowed any of them inside the walls." The suavity of his manner broke fiercely and suddenly. "Everything inside the walls is mine!" he declared with heat. "Mine! mine! mine! Understand? I will not tolerate in here anything that is not mine! that does not obey my will! that does not come when I say come; go when I say go; and fall silent when I say be still!"

A wild and fantastic idea suddenly illuminated my understanding.

"Even the crickets, the flies, the frogs, the birds," I said audaciously.

He fixed his wildcat eyes upon me without answering.

"And," I went on deliberately, "who could deny your perfect right to do what you will with your own? And if they did deny that right what more natural than that they should be made to perish—or take their breakfasts in their rooms?"

I was never more aware of the absolute stillness of the house than when I uttered these foolish words. My hand was on the gun in my trouser-band; but even as I spoke a sickening realization came over me that if the old man opposite so willed, I would have no slightest chance to use it. The air behind me seemed full of menace, and the hair crawled on the back of my neck. Hooper stared at me without sign for ten seconds; his right hand hovered above the polished table. Then he let it fall without giving what I am convinced would have been a signal.

"Will you have more coffee—my guest?" he inquired. And he stressed subtly the last word in a manner that somehow made me just a trifle ashamed.

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At the close of the meal the Mexican familiar glided into the room. Hooper seemed to understand the man's presence, for he arose at once.

"Your horse is saddled and ready," he told me briskly. "You will be wishing to start before the heat of the day. Your *cantinas* are ready on the saddle."

He clapped on his hat and we walked together to the corral. There awaited us not only my own horse, but another. The equipment of the latter was magnificently reminiscent of the old California days—gaily coloured braided hair bridle and reins; silver *conchas*; stock saddle of carved leather with silver horn and cantel, silvered bit bars; gay Navajo blanket as corona; silver corners to skirts, silver *conchas* on the long *tapaderos*. Old Man Hooper strangely incongruous in his wrinkled "store clothes," swung aboard.

"I will ride with you for a distance," he said.

We jogged forth side by side at the slow Spanish trot. Hooper called my attention to the buildings of Fort Shafter glimmering part way up the slopes of the distant mountains, and talked entertainingly of the Indian days, and how the young officers used to ride down to his ranch for music.

After a half hour thus we came to the long string of wire and the huge awkward gate that marked the limit of Hooper's "pasture." Of course the open range was his real pasture; but every ranch enclosed a thousand acres or so somewhere near the home station to be used for horses in active service. Before I could anticipate him, he had sidled his horse skillfully alongside the gate and was holding it open for me to pass. I rode through the opening murmuring thanks and an apology. The old man followed me

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through, and halted me by placing his horse square across the path of mine.

"You are now, sir, outside my land and therefore no longer my guest," he said, and the snap in his voice was like the crackling of electricity. "Don't let me ever see you here again. You are keen and intelligent. You spoke the truth a short time since. You were right. I tolerate nothing in my place that is not my own—no man, no animal, no bird, no insect nor reptile even—that will not obey my lightest order. And these creatures, great or small, who will not—or *even cannot*—obey my orders must go—or die. Understand me clearly?

"You have come here, actuated, I believe by idle curiosity, but without knowledge. You made yourself—ignorantly—my guest; and a guest is sacred. But now you know my customs and ideas. I am telling you. Never again can you come here in ignorance; therefore never again can you come here as a guest; and never again will you pass freely."

He delivered this drily, precisely, with frost in his tones, staring balefully into my eyes. So taken aback was I by this unleashed hostility that for a moment I had nothing to say.

"Now, if you please I will take both notes from that poor idiot: the one I handed you and the one she handed you."

I realized suddenly that the two lay together in the breast pocket of my shirt; that though alike in tenor, they differed in phrasing; and that I had no means of telling one from the other.

"The paper you gave me I read and threw away," I

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stated boldly. "It meant nothing to me. As to any other, I do not know what you are talking about."

"You are lying," he said calmly, as merely stating a fact. "It does not matter. It is my fancy to collect them. I should have liked to add yours. Now get out of this, and don't let me see your face again!"

"Mr. Hooper," said I, "I thank you for your hospitality, which has been complete and generous. You have pointed out the fact that I am no longer your guest. I can therefore with propriety tell you that your ideas and prejudices are noted with interest; your wishes are placed on file for future reference; I don't give a damn for your orders; and you can go to hell!"

"Fine flow of language. Educated cowpuncher," said the old man drily. "You are warned. Keep off. Don't meddle with what does not concern you. And if the rumour get back to me that you've been speculating or talking or criticizing——"

"Well?" I challenged.

"I'll have you killed," he said simply; so simple that I knew he meant it.

"You are foolish to make threats," I rejoined. "Two can play at that game. You drive much alone."

"I do not work alone," he hinted darkly. "The day my body is found dead of violence, that day marks the doom of a long list of men whom I consider inimical to me—like, perhaps, yourself." He stared me down with his unwinking gaze.

CHAPTER V

I returned to Box Springs at a slow jog trot, thinking things over. Old Man Hooper's warning sobered, but did not act as a deterrent of my intention to continue with the adventure. But how? I could hardly storm the fort single handed and carry off the damsel in distress. On the evidence I possessed I could not even get together a storming party. The cowboy is chivalrous enough; but human. He would not uprise spontaneously to the point of war on the mere statement of incarcerated beauty—especially as ill-treatment was not apparent. I would hardly last long enough to carry out the necessary proselyting campaign. It never occurred to me to doubt that Hooper would fulfill his threat of having me killed, or his ability to do so.

So when the men drifted in two by two at dusk, I said nothing of my real adventures, and answered their chaff in kind.

"He played the piano for me," I told them the literal truth, "and had me in to the parlour and dining room. He gave me a room to myself with a bed and sheets; and he rode out to his pasture gate with me to say good-bye," and thereby I was branded a delicious liar.

"They took me into the bunk house and fed me, all right," said Windy Bill, "and fed my horse. Ane next

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morning that old Mexican Joe of his just nat'rally up and kicked me off the premises."

"Wonder you didn't shoot him," I exclaimed.

"Oh, he didn't use his foot. But he sort of let me know that the place was unhealthy to visit more'n once. And somehow I seen he meant it; and I ain't never had no call to go back."

I mulled over the situation all day, and then could stand it no longer. On the dark of the evening I rode to within a couple of miles of Hooper's Ranch, tied my horse, and scouted carefully forward afoot. For one thing I wanted to find out whether the system of high transoms extended to all the rooms, including that in the left wing: for another I wanted to determine the "lay of the land" on that blank side of the house. I found my surmise correct as to the transoms. As to the blank side of the house, that looked down on a wide green moist patch and the irrigating ditch with its stunted willows. Then painstakingly I went over every inch of the terrain about the ranch; and might just as well have investigated the external economy of a mud turtle. Realizing that nothing was to be gained in this manner, I withdrew to my strategic base where I rolled down and slept until daylight. Then I saddled and returned toward the ranch.

I had not ridden two miles, however, before in the boulder-strewn wash of Arroyo Seco I met Jim Starr, one of our men.

"Look here," he said to me. "Jed sent me up to look at the Elder Springs, but my hoss has done cast a shoe. Cain't you ride up there?"

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"I cannot," said I promptly. "I've been out all night and had no breakfast. But you can have my horse."

So we traded horses and separated, each our own way. They sent me out by Coyote Wells with two other men, and we did not get back until the following evening.

The ranch was buzzing with excitement. Jim Starr had not returned, although the ride to Elder Springs was only a two hour affair. After a night had elapsed, and still he did not return, two men had been sent. They found him half way to Elder Springs with a bullet hole in his back. The bullet was that of a rifle. Being plainsmen they had done good detective work of its kind, and had determined—by the direction of the bullet's flight as evidenced by the wound—that it had been fired from a point above. The only point above was the low "rim" that ran for miles down the Soda Springs Valley. It was of black lava and showed no tracks. The men, with a true sense of values, had contented themselves with covering Jim Starr with a blanket, and then had ridden the rim for some miles in both directions looking for a trail. None could be discovered. By this they deduced that the murder was not the result of chance encounter, but had been so carefully planned that no trace would be left of the murderer or murderers.

No theory could be imagined save the rather vague one of personal enmity. Jim Starr was comparatively a new-comer with us. Nobody knew anything much about him or his relations. Nobody questioned the only man who could have told anything; and that man did not volunteer to tell what he knew.

I refer to myself. The thing was sickeningly clear to me.

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Jim starr had nothing to do with it. I was the man for whom that bullet from the rim had been intended. I was the unthinking shortsighted fool who had done Jim Starr to his death. It had never occurred to me that my midnight reconnoitering would leave tracks, that Old Man Hooper's suspicious vigilance would even look for tracks. But given that vigilance, the rest followed plainly enough. A skillful trailer would have found his way to where I had mounted; he would have followed my horse to Arroyo Seco where I had met with Jim Starr. There he would have visualized a rider on a horse without one shoe coming as far as the Arroyo, meeting me, and returning whence he had come; and met at once turning off at right angles. His natural conclusion would be that a messenger had had brought me orders and had returned. The fact that we had shifted mounts he could not have read, for the reason—as I only too distinctly remembered—that we had made the change in the boulder and rock stream bed, which would show no clear traces.

The thought that poor Jim Starr, whom I had well liked, had been sacrificed for me, rendered my ride home with the convoy more deeply thoughtful than even the tragic circumstances warranted. We laid his body in the small office, pending Buck Johnson's return from town, and ate our belated meal in silence. Then we gathered around the corner fireplace in the bunk house, lit our smokes, and talked it over. Jed Parker joined us. Usually he sat with our owner in the office.

Hardly had we settled ourselves to discussion when the door opened and Buck Johnson came in. We had been so

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absorbed that no one had heard him ride up. He leaned his forearm against the doorway at the height of his head and surveyed the silenced group rather ironically.

"Lucky I'm not nervous and jumpy by nature," he observed. "I've seen dead men before. Still, next time you want to leave one in my office after dark, I wish you'd put a light with him, or tack up a sign, or even leave somebody to tell me about it. I'm sorry it's Starr and not that thoughtful old horned toad in the corner."

Jed looked foolish, but said nothing. Buck came in, closed the door, and took a chair square in front of the fireplace. The glow of the leaping flames was full upon him. His strong face and bulky figure were revealed, while the other men sat in half-shadow. He at once took charge of the discussion.

"How was he killed?" he enquired, "bucked off?"

"Shot," replied Jed Parker.

Buck's eyebrows came together.

"Who?" he asked.

He was told the circumstances, as far as they were known; but declined to listen to any of the various deductions and surmises.

"Deliberate murder and not a chance quarrel," he concluded. "He wasn't even within hollering distance of that rim-rock. Anybody know anything about Starr?"

"He's been with us about five weeks," proffered Jed, as foreman. "Said he came from Texas."

"He was a Texican," corroborated one of the other men, "I rode with him considerable."

"What enemies did he have?" asked Buck.

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But it developed that, as far as these men knew, Jim Starr had no enemies. He was a quiet sort of a fellow. He had been to town once or twice. Of course he might have made an enemy, but it was not likely; he had always behaved himself. Somebody would have known of any trouble——

“Maybe somebody followed him from Texas.”

“More likely the usual local work,” Buck interrupted. “This man Starr ever met up with Old Man Hooper or Hooper’s men?”

But here was another impasse. Starr had been over on the Slick Rock ever since his arrival. I could have thrown some light on the matter, perhaps; but new thoughts were coming to me and I kept silence.

Shortly Buck Johnson went out. His departure loosened tongues, among them mine.

“I don’t see why you stand for this old *hombre* if he’s as bad as you say,” I broke in. “Why don’t some of you brave young warriors just naturally pot him?”

And that started a new line of discussion that left me even more thoughtful than before. I knew these men intimately. There was not a coward among them. They had been tried and hardened and tempered in the fierceness of the desert. Any one of them would have twisted the tail of the devil himself; but they were off Old Man Hooper. They did not make that admission in so many words; far from it. And I valued my hide enough to refrain from pointing the fact. But that fact remained; they were off Old Man Hooper. Furthermore, by the time they had finished recounting in intimate detail some scores of anecdotes dealing with what happened when old man Hooper winked his wildcat eye, I

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began in spite of myself to share some of their sentiments. For no matter how flagrant the killing, nor how certain morally the origin, never had the most brilliant nor the most painstaking effort been able to connect with the slayers nor their instigator. He worked in the dark by hidden hands; but the death from the hands was as certain as the rattlesnake's. Certain of his victims, by luck or cleverness, seemed to have escaped sometimes as many as three or four attempts but in the end the old man's Killer's got them.

A Jew drummer who had grossly insulted Hooper in the Lone Star Emporium had, on learning the enormity of his crime, fled to San Francisco. Three months later Soda Springs awoke to find pasted by an unknown hand on the window of the Emporium a newspaper account of that Jew drummer's taking off. The newspaper could offer no theory and merely recited the fact that the man suffered from a heavy-calibred bullet. But always the talk turned back at last to that crowning atrocity, the Boomerang, with its windrows of little calves, starved for water, lying against the fence.

"Yes," someone unexpectedly answered my first question at last, "someone could just naturally pot him easy enough. But I got a hunch that he couldn't get fur enough away to feel safe afterwards. The fellow with a hankering for a good *useful* kind of suicide could get it right there. Any candidates? You-all been looking kinda mournful lately, Windy; s'pose you be the human benefactor and rid the world of this yere reptile."

"Me?" said Windy with vast surprise, "me mournful? Why I sing at my work like a little dicky bird. I'm so

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plum cheerful bull frogs ain't in it. You ain't talking to me!"

But I wanted one more point of information before the conversation veered.

"Does his daughter ever ride out?" I asked.

"Daughter?" they echoed in surprise.

"Or niece, or whoever she is," I supplemented impatiently.

"There's no woman there; not even a Mex," said one; and "Did you see any sign of any woman?" keenly from Windy Bill.

But I was not minded to be drawn.

"Somebody told me about a daughter, or niece, or something," I said vaguely.

CHAPTER VI

I lay in my bunk and cast things up in my mind. The patch of moonlight from the window moved slowly across the floor. One of the men was snoring, but with regularity, so he did not annoy me. The outside silence was softly musical with all the little voices that at Hooper's had so disconcertingly lacked. There were crickets—I had forgotten about them—and frogs, and a hoot owl, and various such matters; beneath whose influence customarily my consciousness merged into sleep so sweetly that I never knew when I had lost them. But I was never wider awake than now; and never had I done more concentrated thinking.

For the moment, and for the moment, only, I was safe. Old Man Hooper thought he had put me out of the way. How long would he continue to think so? how long before his men would bring true word of the mistake that had been made? Perhaps the following day would inform him that Jim Starr and not myself had been reached by his killer's bullet. Then, I had no doubt, a second attempt would be made on my life. Therefore whatever I was going to do must be done quickly.

I had the choice of war or retreat. Would it do me any good to retreat? There was the Jew drummer who was killed in San Francisco; and others whose fates I have not detailed. But why should he particularly desire my ex-

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tingtion? What had I done or what knowledge did I possess that had not been equally done and known by any chance visitor to the Ranch? I remember the notes in my shirt pocket; and, at the risk of awakening some of my comrades, I lit a candle and studied them. They were undoubtedly written by the same hand. To whom had the other been smuggled? and by what means had it come into old man Hooper's possession? The answer hit me so suddenly; and seemed intrinsically so absurd, that I blew out the candle and lay again on my back to study it.

And the more I studied it, the less absurd it seemed, not by the light of reason, but by the feeling of pure intuition. I knew it as sanely as I knew that the moon made that patch of light through the window. The man to whom that other note had been surreptitiously conveyed by the sad-eyed beautiful girl of the iron-barred chamber was dead; and he was dead because Old Man Hooper had so willed. And the former owners of the other notes of the "Collection" concerning which the old man had spoken were dead too—dead for the same reason and by the same hidden hands.

"Why? Because they knew about the girl? Unlikely. Without doubt Hooper had, as in my case, himself made possible that knowledge. But I remembered many things; and I knew that my flash of intuition, absurd as it might seem at first sight, was true. I recalled the swift, darting onslaughts with the fly whackers, the fierce, vindictive slaughter of the frogs, his early morning pursuit of the flock of migrating birds. Especially came clear to my recollection the words spoken at breakfast:

"Everything inside the walls is mine! Mine! Mine!

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Understand? I will not tolerate anything that is not mine! that does not obey my will; that does not come when I say come; go when I say go; and fall silent when I say be still!"

My crime, the crime of these men from whose dead hands the girl's appeals had been taken for the "Collection," was that of curiosity! The old man would within his own domain reign supreme, in the mental as in the physical world. The chance cowboy, genuinely desirous only of a resting place for the night, rode away unscathed; but he whom the old man convicted of a prying spirit committed a lese-majeste that could not be forgiven. And I had made many tracks during my night reconnaissance.

And the same flash of insight showed me that I would be followed wherever I went; and the thing that convinced my intuitions—not my reason—of this was the recollection of the old man stamping the remains of the poor little bird into the mud by the willows. I saw again the insane rage of his face; and I felt cold fingers touching my spine.

On this I went abruptly and unexpectedly to sleep, after the fashion of youth; and did not stir until Sing, the cook, routed us out before dawn. We were not to ride the range that day because of Jim Starr, but Sing was a person of fixed habits. I plunged my head into the face of the dawn with a new and light-hearted confidence. It was one of those clear Nile-green sunrises whose lucent depths go back a million miles or so; and my spirit followed on wings. Gone were at once my fine-spun theories and my forebodings of the night. Life was clean and clear and simple. Jim Starr had probably some personal enemy. Old Man Hooper was undoubtedly a mean old lunatic, and dangerous; very likely

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he would attempt to do me harm, as he said, if I bothered him again, but as for following me to the ends of the earth——

The girl was a different matter. She required thought. So, as I was hungry and the day sparkling, I postponed her and went in to breakfast.

CHAPTER VII

By the time the coroner's inquest and the funeral in town were over it was three o'clock of the afternoon. As I only occasionally managed Soda Springs I felt no inclination to hurry on the return journey. My intention was to watch the Overland through, to make some small purchases at the Lone Star Emporium, to hoist one or two at Magrue's and to dine sumptuously at the best—and only—hotel. A program simple in theme but susceptible to variations.

The latter began early. After posing kiddishly as a rough, woolly romantic cowboy before the passengers of the Overland, I found myself chaperoning a visitor to our midst. By sheer accident the visitor had singled me out for an inquiry.

"Can you tell me how to get to Hooper's Ranch?" he asked.

So I annexed him promptly in hope of developments.

He was certainly no prize package, for he was small, pale, nervous, shifty, and rat-like; and neither his hands nor his eyes were still for an instant. Further to set him apart he wore a hard-boiled hat, a flaming tie, a checked vest, a coat cut too tight for even his emaciated little figure, and long toothpick shoes of patent leather. A fairer mark for cowboy humour would be difficult to find; but I had a personal interest and a determined character so the gang took a look at me and bided their time.

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But immediately I discovered I was going to have my hands full. It seemed that the little shifty rat-faced man had been possessed of a small handbag which the negro porter had failed to put off the train; and which was of tremendous importance. At the discovery it was lacking my new friend went into hysterics. He ran a few feet after the disappearing train; he called upon high heaven to destroy utterly the race of negro porters; he threatened terrible reprisals against a delinquent railroad company; he seized upon a bewildered station agent over whom he poured his troubles in one gush; and he lifted up his voice and wept—literally wept! This to the vast enjoyment of my friends.

“What ails the small party?” asked Windy Bill coming up.

“He’s lost the family jewels!” “The papers are missing.” “Sandy here (meaning me) won’t give him his bottle and it’s past feeding time.” “Sandy’s took away his stick of candy and won’t give it back,” “The little son-of-a-gun’s just remembered that he give the nigger porter two bits,” were some of the replies he got.

On the general principle of “never start anything you can’t finish,” I managed to quell the disturbance; I got a description of the bag; and arranged to have it wired for at the next station. On receiving the news that it could not possibly be returned before the following morning, my protege showed signs of another outburst. To prevent it I took him firmly by the arm and led him across to McGrue’s. He was shivering as though from a violent chill.

The multitude trailed interestedly after; but I took my man into one of McGrue’s private rooms and firmly closed the door.

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"Put that under your belt," I invited, pouring him a half tumbler of McGrue's best, "and pull yourself together."

He smelled it.

"It's only whiskey," he observed mournfully, "That won't help much."

"You don't know this stuff," I encouraged.

He took off the half tumbler without a blink, shook his head, and poured himself another. In spite of his spceticism I thought his nervousness became less marked.

"Now," said I, "if you don't mind, why do you descend on a peaceful community and stir it all up because of the derelictions of an absent coon? and why do you set such store by your travelling bag? and why do you weep in the face of high heaven and outraged manhood? And why do you want to find Hooper's Ranch? And why are you and your vaudeville make up?"

But he proved singularly embarrassed and nervous and uncommunicative, darting his glance here and there about him, twisting his hands, never by any chance meeting my eye. I leaned back and surveyed him in considerable disgust.

"Look here, brother," I pointed out to him. "You don't seem to realize. A man like you can't get away with himself in this country except behind footlights—and there ain't any footlights. All I got to do is to throw open yonder door and withdraw my beneficent protection and you will be set upon by a pack of ravening wolves with their own ideas of humour, among whom I especially mention one Windy Bill. I'm about the only thing that looks like a friend you've got."

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He caught at the last sentence only.

"You my friend?" he said breathlessly, "then tell me: is there a doctor around here?"

"No," said I, looking at him closely, "not this side of Tucson. Are you sick?"

"Is there a drug store in town, then?"

"Nary drug store."

He jumped to his feet, knocking over his chair as he did so.

"My God!" he cried in uncontrollable excitement, "I've got to get my bag! How far is it to the next station where they're going to put it off? Ain't there some way of getting there? I got to get to my bag."

"It's near to forty miles," I replied, leaning back.

"And there's no drug store here? What kind of a bum tank town is this, anyhow?"

"They keep a few patent medicines and such over at the Lone Star Emporium——" I started to tell him. I never had a chance to finish my sentence. He darted around the table, grabbed me by the arm and urged me to my feet.

"Show me!" he panted.

We sailed through the bar room under full head of steam, leaving the gang staring after us open-mouthed. I could feel we were exciting considerable public interest. At the Lone Star Emporium the little freak looked wildly about him until his eyes fell on the bottle shelves. Then he rushed right in behind the counter and began to paw them over. I headed off Sol Levi, who was coming front making war medicine.

"Loco," says I to him. "If there's any damage, I'll settle."

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It looked like there was going to be damage all right, the way he snatched up one bottle after the other, read the labels, and thrust them one side. At last he uttered a crow of delight, just like a kid.

"How many you got of these?" he demanded, holding up a bottle of Soothing Syrup.

"You only take a tablespoon of that stuff——" began Sol.

"How may you got—how much are they?" interrupted the stranger.

"Six—three dollars a bottle," says Sol, boosting the price.

The little man peeled a twenty off a roll of bills and threw it down.

"Keep the other five bottles for me?" he cried in a shaky voice, and ran out, with me after him, forgetting his change and to shut the door behind us.

Back through McGrue's bar we trailed like one of these moving picture chases and into the back room.

"Well, here we are home again," said I.

The stranger grabbed a glass and filled it half full of Soothing Syrup.

"Here, you aren't going to drink that!" I yelled at him, "Didn't you hear Sol tell you the dose is a spoonful?"

But he didn't pay me any attention. His hand was shaking so he could hardly connect with his own mouth, and he was panting as though he'd run a race.

"Well, no accounting for tastes," I said. "Where do you want me to ship your remains?"

He drank her down, shut his eyes a few minutes, and held still. He had quit his shaking, and he looked me square in the face.

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"What's it to you?" he demanded, "Huh? Ain't you never seen a guy hit the hop before?"

He stared at me so truculently that I was moved to righteous wrath; and I answered him back. I told him what I thought of him and his clothes and his conduct at quite some length. When I had finished he seemed to have gained a new attitude of aggravating wise superiority.

"That's all right, kid; that's all right," he assured me, "keep your hair on. I ain't such a bad scout; but you gotta get used to me. Give me my hop and I'm all right. Now about this Hooper; you say you know him?"

"None better," I rejoined. "But what's that to you? That's a fair question."

He bored me with his beady rat eyes for several seconds.

"Friend of yours?" he asked briefly.

Something in the intonations of his voice induced me to frankness.

"I have good cause to think he's trying to kill me," I replied.

He produced a pocket book, fumbled in it for a moment, and laid before me a clipping. It was from the Want column of a newspaper, and read as follows:

"A.A.B.—Will deal with you on your terms. H.H."

"A.A.B. that's me—Artie Brower. And H.H.—that's him—Henry Hooper," he explained. "And that lil' piece of paper means that's he's caved, come off, war's over. Means I'm rich, that I can have my own ponies, if I want to, 'stead of touting somebody else's old dogs. It means that I got old H.H.—Henry Hooper—where the hair is short, and he's got to come my way!"

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His eyes were glittering restlessly, and the pupils seemed to be unduly dilated. The whiskey and opium together—probably an unaccustomed combination—were too much for his ill-balanced control. Every indication of his face and his narrow eyes was for secrecy and craft; yet for the moment he was opening up to me, a stranger, like an oyster. Even my inexperience could see that much, and I eagerly took advantage of my chance.

“You are a horseman, then?” I suggested.

“Me a horseman? Say, kid, you didn’t get my name. Brower—Artie Brower. Why, I’ve ridden more winning races than any other man on the Pacific Coast. That’s how I got onto old H.H. I rode for him. He knows a good horse all right—the old skunk. Used to have a pretty string.”

“He’s got at least one good Morgan stallion now,” said I. “I’ve seen him at Hooper’s Ranch.”

“I know the old crock-trotter,” scorned the true riding jockey. “Probably old Tim Westmore is hanging around too. He’s in love with that horse.”

“Is he in love with Hooper, too?” I asked.

“Just like I am,” said the jockey with a leer.

“So you’re going to be rich,” said I. “How’s that?”

He leered at me again, going foxy.

“Don’t you wish you knew! But I’ll tell you this: old H.H. is going to give me all I want—just because I ask him to.”

I took another tack, affecting incredulity.

“The hell he is. He’ll hand you over to Ramon and that will be the last of a certain jockey.”

“No, he won’t do no such trick. I’ve fixed that; and he

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knows it. If he kills me, he'll lose *all* he's got 'stead of only part."

"You're drunk or dreaming," said I. "If you bother him, he'll just plain have you killed. That's a little way of his."

"And if he does a friend of mine will just go to a certain place and get certain papers and give 'em to a certain lawyer—and then where's old H.H.? And he knows it, dam well. And he's going to be good to Artie and give him what he wants. We'll get along fine. Took him a long time to come to it; but I didn't take no chances while he was making up his mind; you can bet on that."

"Blackmail, eh?" I said, with just enough of a sneer to fire him.

"Blackmail nothing!" he shouted. "It ain't blackamil to take away what don't belong to a man at all!"

"What don't belong to him?"

"Nothing. Not a damn thing except his money. This ranch. The oil wells in California. The cattle. Not a dam thing. That was the agreement with his pardner when they split. And I've got the agreement! Now what you got to say?"

"Say? Why its *loco*! Why doesn't the pardner raise a row?"

"He's dead."

"His heirs then?"

"He hasn't got but one heir—his daughter." My heart skipped a beat in the amazement of a half ideas.

"And she knew nothing about the agreement. Nobody knows but old H.H.—and me." He sat back, visibly gloating over me. But his mood was passing. His earlier

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exhilaration had died; and with it was dying the expansiveness of his confidence. The triumph of his last speech savoured he slipped again into his normal self. He looked at me suspiciously, and raised his whiskey to cover his confusion.

"What's it to yuh, anyway?" he muttered into his glass darkly. His eyes were again shifting here and there; and his lips were snarled back malevolently to show his teeth.

At this precise moment the lords of chance willed Windy Bill and others to intrude on our privacy by opening the door and hurling several whiskey-flavoured sarcasms at the pair of us. The jockey seemed to explode after the fashion of an over-inflated ball. He squeaked like a rat, leaped to his feet, hurled the chair on which he had been sitting crash against the door from which Windy Bill *et al* had withdrawn hastily, and ended by producing a small wicked-looking automatic—then a new and strange weapon—and rushing out into the main saloon. There he announced that he was known to the cognoscenti as Art the Blood and was a city gunman in comparison with which these plain so-called bad men were as sucking doves to the untamed eagle. Thence he glanced briefly at their ancestry as far as known; and ended by rushing forth in the general direction of McCloud's Hotel.

"Suffering giraffes!" gasped Windy Bill after the whirlwind had passed. "Was that the scared little rabbit that wept all them salt tears over at the depot? What brand of licker did you feed him, Sandy?"

I silently handed him the bottle.

"Soothing Syrup—my God!" said Windy in hushed tones.

CHAPTER VIII

At that epoch I prided myself on being a man of resource; and I proceeded to prove it in a fashion that even now fills me with satisfaction. I annexed the remainder of that bottle of soothing syrup; I went to Sol Levi and easily procured delivery of the other five. Then I strolled peacefully to supper over at McCloud's hotel. Pathological knowledge of dope fiends was outside my ken;—I could not guess how soon my man would need another dose of his "hop," but I was positively sure that another would be needed. Inquiry of McCloud elicited the fact that the ex-jockey had swallowed a hasty meal and had immediately retired to Room 4. I found Room 4 unlocked, and Brower lying fully clothed sound asleep across the bed. I did not disturb him, except that I robbed him of his pistol. All looked safe for awhile; but just to be certain I took Room 6, across the narrow hall, and left both doors open. McCloud's hotel never did much of a room business. By midnight the cowboys would be on their way for the ranches. Brower and myself were the only occupants of the second floor.

For two hours I smoked and read. The ex-jockey did not move a muscle. Then I went to bed and to a sound sleep; but I set my mind like an alarm clock, so that the slightest move from the other room would have fetched me broad awake. City-bred people may not know that this

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can be done by most outdoor men. I have listened subconsciously to horsebells for so many nights, for example that even on stormy nights the cessation of that faint twinkle will awaken me, while the crash of the elements or even the fall of a tree would not in the slightest disturb my tired slumbers. So now, although the songs and stamping and racket of the revellers below stairs in McCloud's bar did not for one second prevent my falling into deep and dreamless sleep, Brower's softest tread would have reached my consciousness.

However, he slept right through the night, and was still dead to the world when I slipped out at six o'clock to meet the east-bound train. The bag—a small black Gladstone—was aboard in charge of the baggagemen. I had no great difficulty in getting it from my friend, the station agent. Had he not seen me herding the locoed stranger? I secreted the black bag with the five full bottles of soothing syrup, slipped the half-emptied bottle in my pocket, and returned to the hotel. There I ate breakfast, and sat down for a comfortable chat with McCloud while awaiting results.

Got them very promptly. About eight o'clock Brower came downstairs. He passed through the office, nodding curtly to McCloud and me, and into the dining room where he drank several cups of coffee. Thence he passed down the street toward Sol Levi's. He emerged rather hurriedly and slanted across to the station.

"In about two minutes," I observed to McCloud, "you're going to observe yon butterfly turn into a stinging lizard. He's going to head in this direction; and he'll probably aim to climb my hump. Such being the case, and the affair

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being private, you'll do me a favour by supervising something in some remote corner of the premises."

"Sure," said McCloud, "I'll go twist that Chink washeeman. Been intending to for a week." And he stumped out on his wooden foot.

The comet hit at precisely 7:42 by McCloud's big clock. Its head was Brower at high speed and tension; and its tail was the light alkali dust of Arizona mingled with the station agent. No irresistible force and immovable body proposition in mine; I gave to the impact.

"Why, sure, I got 'em for you," I answered, "You left your dope lying around loose so I took care of it for you. As for your bag; you seemed to set such store by it that I got that for you, too."

Which deflated that particular enterprise for the moment anyway. The station agent, too mad to spit, departed before he should be tempted beyond his strength to resist homicide.

"I suppose you're taking care of my gun for me, too," said Brower; but his irony was weak. He was evidently off the boil.

"Your gun?" I echoed. "Have you lost your gun?"

He passed his hand across his eyes. His super-excitement had passed, leaving him weak and nervous. Now was the time for my counter-attack.

"Here's your gun," said I, "didn't want to collect any lead while you were excited, and I've got your dope," I repeated—"in a safe place," I added, "and you'll not see any of it again until you answer me a few questions, and answer them straight."

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"If you think you can roll me for blackmail," he came back with some decision, "you're left a mile."

"I don't want a cent; but I do want a talk."

"Shoot," said he.

"How often do you have to have this dope—for the best results; and how much of it at a shot?"

He stared at me for a moment; then laughed.

"What's it to yuh?" he repeated his formula.

"I want to know."

"I get to needing it about once a day. Three grains will carry me by."

"All right; that's what I want to know. Now listen to me. I'm custodian of this dope, and you'll get your regular ration as long as you stick with me."

"I can always hop a train. This ain't the only hamlet on the map," he reminded me.

"That's always what you can do, if you find we can't work together. That's where you've got me if my proposition doesn't sound good."

"What is your proposition?" he asked after a moment.

"Before I tell you, I'm going to give you a few pointers on what you're up against. I don't know how much you know about Old Man Hooper, but I'll bet there's plenty you *don't* know about."

I proceeded to tell him something of the old man's methods, from the "boomerang" to vicarious murder.

"And he gets away with it?" said Brower when I had finished.

"He certainly does," said I. "Now," I continued, "You may be solid as a brick church, and your plans may

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be water-tight; and old Hooper may kill the fatted four-year-old, for all I know. But if I were you, I wouldn't go sasshaying all alone out to Hooper's Ranch. It's altogether *too* blame confiding and innocent."

"If anything happens to me, I've left directions for those contracts to be recorded," he pointed out. "Old Hooper knows that."

"Oh, sure!" I replied, "just like that! But one day your trustworthy friend back yonder will get a letter in your well-known hand-write that will say that all is well and the goose hangs high, that the old man is a prince and has come through, and that in accordance with the nice, friendly agreement you have reached he—your friend—will hand over the contract to a very respectable lawyer herein named, and so forth and so on, ending with your equally well-known John Hancock."

"Well, that's all right."

"I hadn't finished the picture. In the meantime, you will be getting out of it just one good swift kick; and that is all."

"I shouldn't write any such letter. Not 'til I felt the feel of the dough."

"Not at first you wouldn't," I said softly. "Certainly not at first. But after a while you would. These renegade Mexicans—like Hooper's Ramon, for example—know a lot of rotten little tricks. They drive pitch-pine splinters into your legs and set fire to them, for one thing. Or make small cuts in you with a knife, and load them up with powder squibs in oiled paper—so the blood won't wet them—and touch them off. And so on. When you've been shown

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about ten per cent. of what old Ramon knows about such things, you'll write most any kind of a letter."

"My God!" he muttered, thrusting the ridiculous derby to the back of his head.

"So you see you'd look sweet walking trustfully into Hooper's claws. That's what that newspaper ad was meant for. And when the respectable lawyer wrote that the contract had been delivered, do you know what would happen to you?"

The ex-jockey shuddered.

"But you've only told me part of what I want to know," I pursued. "You got me side-tracked. This daughter of the dead partner—this girl, what about her? Where is she now?"

"Europe, I believe."

"When did she go?"

"About three months ago."

"Any other relatives?"

"Not that I know of."

"H'm," I pondered. "What does she look like?"

"She's about medium height, dark, good figure, good-looking all right. She's got eyes wide apart and a wide forehead. That's the best I can do. Why?"

"Anybody heard from her since she went to Europe?"

"How should I know?" rejoined Brower impatiently, "What you driving at?"

"I think I've seen her. I believe she's not in Europe at all. I believe she's a prisoner at the Ranch."

"My aunt!" ejaculated Brower. His nervousness was increasing—the symptoms I was to recognize so well. "Why

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the hell don't you just shoot him from behind a bush? I'll do it, if you won't."

"He's too smooth for that," and I told him what Hooper had told me. "His hold on these Mexicans is remarkable. I don't doubt that fifty of the best killers in the southwest have lists of the men Old Man Hooper thinks might lay him out. And every man on that list would get his within a year—without any doubt. I don't doubt that partner's daughter would go first of all. You, too, of course."

"My aunt!" groaned the jockey again.

"He's a killer," I went on, "by nature, and by interest—a bad combination. He ought to be tramped out like a rattlesnake. But this is a new country, and it's near the border. I expect he's got me marked. If I have to I'll kill him just like I would a rattlesnake; but that wouldn't do me a whole lot of good and would probably get a bunch assassinated. I'd like to figure something different. So you see you'd better come on in while the coming is good."

"I see," said the ex-jockey, very much subdued. "What's your idea? What do you want me to do?"

That stumped me. To tell the truth I had no idea at all what to do.

"I don't want you to go out to Hooper's Ranch alone," said I.

"Trust me!" he rejoined fervently.

"I reckon the first best thing is to get along out of town," I suggested. "That black bag all the plunder you got?"

"That's it."

"Then we'll go out a-horseback."

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We had lunch and a smoke and settled up with McCloud. About mid-afternoon we went on down to the livery corral. I knew the keeper pretty well, of course, so I borrowed a horse and saddle for Brower. The latter looked with extreme disfavour on both.

"This is no race meet," I reminded him. "This is a means of transportation."

"Sorry I ain't got nothing better," apologized Meigs, to whom I had confided my companion's profession—I had to account for such a figure somehow. "All my saddle hosses went off with a mine outfit yesterday."

"Whats the matter with that chestnut in the shed?"

"He's all right; fine beast. Only it ain't mine. It belongs to Ramon."

"Ramon from Hooper's?"

"Yeah."

"I'd let you ride my horse and take Meigs's old skate myself," I said to Brower. "But when you first get on him this bronc of mine is a rip humming tail twister. Ain't he, Meigs?"

"He's a bad *caballo*," corroborated Meigs.

"Does he buck?" queried Brower indifferently.

"Every known fashion. Bites, scratches, gouges, and paws. Want to try him?"

"I got a headache," replied Brower grouchily. "Bring out your old dog."

When I came back from roping and blindfolding the twisted dynamite I was engaged in "gentling," I found that Brower was saddling the mournful creature with my saddle. My expostulation found him very snappy and

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very arbitrary. His opium-irritated nerves were beginning to react. I realized that he was not far short of explosive obstinacy. So I conceded the point; although, as every rider knows, a cowboy's saddle and a cowboy's gun are like unto a toothbrush when it comes to lending. Also it involved changing the stirrup length on the livery saddle. I needed things just right to ride Tiger through the first five minutes.

When I had completed this latter operation, Brower had just finished drawing tight the cinch. His horse stood dejectedly. When Brower had made fast the latigo, the horse—as such dispirited animals often do—heaved a deep sigh. Something snapped beneath the slight strain of the indrawn breath.

“Dogged if your cinch ain't busted!” cried Meigs with a loud laugh. “Lucky for you your friend did borrow your saddle! If you'd clumb Tiger with that outfit you could just naturally have begun pickin' out the likely-looking she-angels.”

I dropped the stirrup and went over to examine the damage. Both of the quarter straps on the off side had given away. I found that they had been cut nearly through with a sharp knife. My eye strayed to Ramon's chestnut horse standing under the shed.

CHAPTER IX

We jogged out to Box Springs by way of the lower alkali flats. It is about three miles farther that way; but one can see for miles in every direction. I did not one bit fancy the cañons, the mesquite patches and the open ground of the usual route.

I beguiled the distance watching Brower. The animal he rode was a hammer-headed, ewe-necked beast with a disconsolate eye and a half-shed winter coat. The ex-jockey was not accustomed to a stock saddle. He had shortened his stirrups beyond all reason so that his knees and his pointed shoes and his elbows stuck out at all angles. He had thrust his derby hat far down over his ears, and buttoned his inadequate coat tightly. In addition he was nourishing a very considerable grouch, attributable, I suppose, to the fact that his customary dose was just about due. Tiger could not be blamed for dancing wide. Evening was falling, the evening of the desert when mysterious things seem to swell and draw imminent out of unguessed distances. I could not help wondering what these gods of the desert could be thinking of us.

However, as we drew imperceptibly nearer the tiny patch of cottonwoods that marked Box Springs, I began to realize that it would be more to the point to wonder what that gang of hoodlums in the bunk house was going to think of us.

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The matter had been fairly well carried off up to that moment; but I could not hope for a successful repetition. No man could continue to lug around with him so deliciously a vaudeville sketch without some concession to curiosity. Nor could any mortal for long wear such clothes in the face of Arizona without being required to show cause. He had got away with it last night, by surprise; but that would be about all.

At my fiftieth attempt to enter into conversation with him, I unexpectedly succeeded. I believe I was indicating the points of interest. You can see farther in Arizona than any place I know, so there was no difficulty about that. I'd pointed out the range of the Chiracahuas, and Cochise's Stronghold, and the peaks of the Galiuros and other natural sceneries; I had showed him mesquite and yucca, and mescal and soapweed, and sage, and sacatone and niggerheads and all the other known vegetables of the region. Also I'd indicated prairie dogs and squinch owls and Gambel's quail and road runners and a couple of coyotes and lizzards and other miscellaneous fauna. Not to speak of naming painstakingly the ranches indicated by the clumps of trees that you could just make out as little spots in the distance—Box Springs, the O. T., the Double H, Fort Shafter and Hoopers. He waked up and paid a little attention at this; and I thought I might get a little friendly talk out of him. A cowboy rides around along so much he sort of likes to josh when he has anybody with him. This "strong silent" stuff doesn't go until you've used around with a man quite some time.

I got the talk, all right, but it didn't have a thing to do

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with topography or natural history. Unless you call the skate he was riding natural history. That was the burden of his song. He didn't like that horse, and he didn't care who knew it. It was an uncomfortable horse to ride on, it required exertion to keep in motion, and it hurt his feelings. Expecially the last. He was a horseman, a jockey, he'd ridden the best blood in the equine world; and here he was condemned through no fault of his own to straddle a cross between a llama and a wooly toy sheep. It hurt his pride. He felt bitterly about it. Indeed, he fairly harped on the subject.

"“Is that horse of yours through bucking for the day?” he asked at last.

“Certain thing. Tiger never pitches but the once.”

“Let me ride him a ways. I'd like to feel a real horse to get the taste of this kangaroo out of my system.”

I could see he was jumpy, so I thought I'd humour him.

“Swing on all at once and you're all right,” I advised him. “Tiger don't like fumbling in getting aboard.”

He grunted scornfully.

“Those stirrups are longer than the ones you've been using. Want to shorten them?”

He did not bother to answer, but mounted in a decisive manner that proved he was indeed a horseman, and a good one. I climbed old crow bait and let my legs hang.

The jockey gathered the reins and touched Tiger with his heels. I kicked my animal with my stock spurs and managed to extract a lumbering sort of gallop.

“Hey, slow up!” I called after a few moments, “I can't keep up with you.”

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Brower did not turn his head, nor did Tiger slow up. After twenty seconds I realized that he intended to do neither. I ceased urging on my animal; there was no use tiring us both; evidently the jockey was enjoying to the full the exhilaration of a good horse, and we would catch up at Box Springs. I only hoped the boys wouldn't do anything drastic to him before my arrival.

So I jogged along at the little running walk possessed by even the most humble cattle horse, and enjoyed the evening. It was going on towards dusk and pools of twilight were in the bottom lands. For the moment the world had grown, smaller, more intimate, as the skies expanded. The dust from Brower's going did not so much recede as grow littler, more toy-like. I watched idly his progress.

At a point perhaps a mile this side the Box Springs ranch the road divides; the right hand fork leading to the ranch house, the left on up the valley. After a moment I noticed that the dust was on the left hand fork. I swore aloud.

"The damn fool had taken the wrong road!" and then after a moment, with dismay: "He's headed straight for Hooper's Ranch!"

I envisaged the full joy and rapture of this thought for perhaps half a minute. It sure complicated matters, what with old Hooper gunning on my trail, and this partner's daughter shut up behind bars. Me, I expected to last about two days unless I did something mighty sudden. Brower I expected might last approximately half that time, depending on how soon Ramon *et al* got busy. The girl I didn't know anything about, nor did I want to at that moment. I was plenty worried about my own precious

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hide just then. And if you think you are going to get a love story out of this, I warn you again to quit right now; you are not.

Brower was going to walk into that gray old spider's web like a nice fat fly. And he was going to land without even the aid and comfort of his own particular brand of Dutch courage. For safety's sake, and because of Tiger's playful tendencies when first mounted, we had tied the famous black bag—which now for convenience contained also the soothing syrup—behind the cantle of Meig's old nag. Which said nag I now possessed together with all appurtenances and attachments thereunto appertaining I tried to speculate on the reactions of Old Man Hooper, Ramon, Brower and no dope, but it was too much for me. My head was getting tired thinking about all these complicated things anyhow. I was accustomed to nice simple jobs with my head, like figuring on the shrinkage of beef cattle, or the inner running of a two card draw. All this annoyed me. I began to get mad. When I got mad enough I cussed and came to a decision; which was to go after Old Man Hooper and all his works that very night. Next day wouldn't do; I wanted action right off quick. Naturally I had no plans, nor even a glimmering of what I was going to do about it; but you bet you I was going to do something! As soon as it was dark I was going right on up there. Frontal attack, you understand. As to details; those would take care of themselves as the affair developed. Having come to which sapient decision I shoved the whole irritating mess over the edge of my mind and rode on quite happy. I told you at the start of this yarn that I was a kid.

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My mind being now quite easy as to my future actions, I gave thought to the first steps. That was supper. There seemed to me no adequate reason, with a fine long night before me, why I shouldn't use a little of the shank end of it to stoke up for the rest. So I turned at the right hand fork and jogged slowly toward our own ranch.

Of course I had the rotten luck to find most of the boys still at the water corral. When they saw who was the lone horseman approaching through the dusk of the spring twilight, and got a good fair look at the ensemble, they dropped everything and came over to see about it, headed naturally by those mournful blights, Windy Bill and Wooden. In solemn silence they examined my outfit paying not the slightest attention to me. At the end of a full minute they looked at each other.

"What do you think, Sam?" asked Windy.

"My opinion is not quite formed, suh," replied Wooden, who was a Texican, "But my first examination inclines me to the belief that it is a hoss."

"Yo're wrong, Sam," denied Windy sadly, "Yo're judgment is confused by the fact that the critter carries a saddle. Look at the animile itself."

"I have done it," continued Sam Wooden, "at first glance I should agree with you. Look carefully, Windy. Examine the details; never mind the *toot enscramble*. Its got hoofs."

"So's a cow, a goat, a burro, a camel, a hippypottamus and the devil," pointed out Windy.

"Of course I may be wrong," acknowledged Wooden, "On second examination I probably am wrong. But if it ain't a hoss, then what is it? Do you know?"

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"It's a genuine royal gyasticutus," asserted Windy Bill, positively. "I seen one once. It has one peculiarity that you can't never fail to identify it by."

"What's that?"

"It invariably travels around with a congenital idiot."

Wooden promptly conceded that; but claimed the identification not complete as he doubted whether, strictly speaking, I could be classified as a congenital idiot. Windy pointed out that evidently I had traded Tiger for the gyasticutus. Wooden admitted that this proved me an idiot, but not necessarily a congenital idiot.

This colloquy—and more like it—went on with entire gravity. The other men were hanging about relishing the situation, but without a symptom of mirth. I was unsaddling methodically, paying no attention to anybody, and apparently deaf to all that was being said. If the two old fools had succeeded in eliciting a word from me, they would have been entirely happy; but I knew that fact, and shut my lips.

I hung my saddle on the rack and was just about to lead the old skate to water when we all heard the sound of a horse galloping on the road.

"It's a light hoss," said somebody after a moment, meaning a horse without a burden.

We nodded and resumed our occupation. A stray horse coming in to water was nothing strange or unusual. But an instant later, stirrups swinging, reins flapping, up dashed my own horse, Tiger.

CHAPTER XI

All this being beyond me, and then some, I proceeded methodically to carry out my complicated plan; which was, it will be remembered, to eat supper and then to go and see about it in person. I performed the first part of this to my entire satisfaction but not to that of the rest. They accused me of unbecoming secrecy; only they expressed it differently. That did not worry me; and in due time I made my escape. At the corral I picked out a good horse, one that I had brought from the Gila, that would stay tied indefinitely without impatience. Then I lighted me a cigarette and jogged up the road. I carried with me a little grub, my six-gun, the famous black bag, and an entirely empty head.

The night was only moderately dark, for while there was no moon there were plenty of those candle-like desert stars. The little twinkling lights of the Box Springs dropped astern like lamps on a shore. By and by I turned off the road and made a wide *détour* down the sacatone bottoms, for I had still some sense; and roads were a little too obvious. The reception committee that had taken charge of my little friend might be expecting another visitor—me. This brought my approach to the blank side of the ranch where were the willow trees and the irrigating ditch. I rode up as close as I thought I ought to. Then I tied my horse to a

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prominent lone joshua-tree that would be easy to find, unstrapped the black bag, and started off. The black bag, however, bothered me; so after some thought I broke the lock with a stone and investigated the contents, mainly by feel. There were a lot of clothes and toilet articles and such junk, and a number of undetermined hard things like round wooden boxes. Finally I withdrew to the shelter of a *barranca* where I could light matches. Then I had no difficulty in identifying a nice compact little hypodermic outfit, which I slipped into a pocket. I then deposited the bag in a safe place where I could find it easily.

Leaving my horse I approached the Ranch under cover of the willows. Yes, I remembered this time that I left tracks; but I did not care. My idea was to get some sort of decisive action before morning. Once through the willows I crept up close to the walls. They were twelve or fifteen feet high, absolutely smooth; and with one exception broken only by the long narrow loop holes or transoms I have mentioned before. The one exception was a small wicket gate or door. I remembered the various sorties with torches after the chirping frogs, and knew that by this opening the hunting party had emerged. This and the big main gate were the only entrances to the enclosure.

I retired to the vicinity of the willows and uttered the cry of the barred owl. After ten seconds I repeated it, and so continued. My only regret was that I could not chirp convincingly like a frog. I saw a shadow shift suddenly through one of the transoms; and at once glided to the wall near the little door. After a moment or so it opened to emit Old Man Hooper and another bulkier figure which

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I imagined to be that of Ramon. Both were armed with shotguns. Suddenly it came to me that I was lucky not to have been able to chirp convincingly like a frog. They hunted frogs with torches and in a crowd. Those two carried no light and they were so intent on making a sneak on the willows and the supposititious owl that I, flattened in the shadow of the wall, easily escaped their notice. I slipped inside the doorway.

This brought me into a narrow passage between two buildings. The other end looked into the interior court. A careful reconnaissance showed no one in sight, so I walked boldly along the verandah in the direction of the girl's room. Her note had said she was constantly guarded; but I could see no one in sight, and I had to take a chance somewhere. Two seconds' talk would do me; I wanted to know in which of the numerous rooms the old man slept. I had a hunch it would be a good idea to share that room with him. What to do then I left to the hunch.

But when I was half way down the verandah I heard the wicket door slammed shut. The owl hunters had returned more quickly than I had anticipated. Running as lightly as possible I darted down the verandah and around the corner of the left wing. This brought me into a narrow little garden strip between the main house and the wall dividing the court from the corralls and stable yards. Footsteps followed me, but stopped. A hand tried the door knob to the corner room.

"Nothing," I heard Hooper's voice replying to a question. "Nothing at all. Go to sleep."

The fragrant smell of Mexican tobacco reached my nos-

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trils. After a moment Ramon,—it was he—resumed a conversation in Spanish.

“I do not know, señor, who the man was. I could but listen; it was not well to inquire nor to show too much interest. His name, yes; Jim Starr, but who he is——” I could imagine the shrug. “It is of no importance.”

“It is of importance that the other man still lives,” broke in Hooper’s harsher voice, “I will not have it, I say! Are you sure of it?”

“I saw him. And I saw his horse at the Señor Meigs. It was the brown that bucks badly, so I cut the quarter straps of his saddle. It might be that we have luck; I do not count on it. But rest your mind easy, señor, it shall be arranged.”

“It better be.”

“But there is more, señor. The señor will remember a man who rode in races for him many years ago, one named Artie——”

“Brower!” broke in Hooper, “What about him?”

“He is in town. He arrived yesterday afternoon.”

Hooper ejaculated something.

“And more, he is all day and all night with this Sanborn.”

Hooper swore fluently in English.

“Look, Ramon!” he ordered vehemently. “It is necessary to finish this Sanborn at once, without delay.”

“*Bueno*, señor.”

“It must not go over a single day.”

“Haste makes risk, señor.”

“The risk must be run.”

“*Bueno*, señor. And also this Artie?”

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"No! No! no!" hastened Hooper. "Guard him as your life! But send a trusty man for him to-morrow with the buckboard. He comes to see me, in answer to my invitation."

"And if he will not come, señor?" inquired Ramon's quiet voice.

"Why should he not come?"

"He has been much with Sanborn."

"It's necessary that he come," replied Hooper, emphasizing each word.

"*Bueno*, señor."

"Who is to be on guard?"

"Cortinez, señor."

"I will send him at once. Do me the kindness to watch for a moment until I send him. Here is the key; give it to him. It shall be but a moment."

"*Bueno*, señor," replied Ramon.

He leaned against the corner of the house. I could see the half of his figure against the sky and the dim white of the walls.

The night was very still, as always at this ranch. There was not even a breeze to create a rustle in the leaves. I was obliged to hold rigidly motionless, almost to hush my breathing, while the figure bulked large against the white-washed wall. But my eyes, wide to the dimness, took in every detail of my surroundings. Near me stood a water barrel. If I could get a spring from that water barrel I could catch one of the heavy projecting beams of the roof.

After an apparently interminable interval the sound of footsteps became audible, and a moment later Ramon moved to meet his relief. I seized the opportunity of their

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conversation and ascended to the roof. It proved to be easy, although the dried out old beam to which for a moment I swung, creaked outrageously. Probably it sounded louder to me than the actual fact. I took off my boots and moved cautiously to where I could look down into the court. Ramon and his companion were still talking under the verandah, so I could not see them; but I waited until I heard one of them move away. Then I went to seat myself on the low parapet and think things over.

The man below me had the key to the girl's room. If I could get the key I could accomplish the first step of my plan—indeed the only step I had determined upon. The exact method of getting the key would have to develop. In the meantime I gave passing wonder to the fact, as developed by the conversation between Hooper and Ramon, that Brower was not at the Ranch and had not been heard of at the Ranch. Where had Tiger dumped him, and where now was he lying? I keenly regretted the loss of a possible ally; and, much to my astonishment, I found within myself a little regret for the man himself.

The thought of the transom occurred to me. I tiptoed over to that side and looked down. The opening was about five feet below the parapet. After a moment's thought I tied a bit of stone from the coping in the end of my silk bandana and lowered it at arm's length. By swinging it gently back and forth I determined that the transom was open. With the stub of the pencil every cowboy carried to tally with I scribbled a few words on an envelop which I wrapped about the bit of coping. Something to the effect that I was there, and expected to gain entrance to her room

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later, and to be prepared. Then I lowered my contraption, caused it to tap gently a dozen times on the edge of the transom, and finally swung it with a rather nice accuracy to fly, bandana and all, through the opening. After a short interval of suspense I saw the reflection of a light and so knew my message had been received.

There was nothing to do now but return to a point of observation. On my way I stubbed my stockinged foot against a stone *metate* or mortar in which Indians and Mexicans make their flour. The heavy pestle was there. I annexed it. Dropped accurately from the height of the roof it would make a very pretty weapon. The trouble, of course, lay in that word "accurately."

But I soon found the fates playing into my hands. At the end of a quarter hour the sentry emerged from under the verandah, looked up at the sky, yawned, stretched, and finally sat down with his back against the wall of the building opposite. Inside of ten minutes he was sound asleep and snoring gently.

I wanted nothing better than that. The descent was a little difficult to accomplish noiselessly, as I had to drop some feet, but I managed it. After crouching for a moment to see if the slight sounds had aroused him, I crept along the wall to where he sat. The stone pestle of the *metate* I had been forced to leave behind me, but I had the heavy barrel of my gun, and I was going to take no chances. I had no compunctions as to what I did to any one of this pack of mad dogs. Cautiously I drew it from its holster and poised it to strike. At that instant I was seized and pinioned from behind.

CHAPTER XII

I did not struggle. I would have done so if I had been able, but I was caught in a grip so skillful that the smallest move gave me the most exquisite pain. At that time I had not even heard the words *jiu jitsu*, but I have looked them up since. Cortinez, the sleepy sentry, without changing his position, had opened his eyes and was grinning at me.

I was forced to my feet and marched to the open door of the corner room. There I was released; and turned around to face Hooper himself. The old man's face was twisted in a sardonic half-snarl that might pass for a grin; but there was no smile in his unblinking wild-cat eyes. There seemed to be trace neither of the girl nor the girl's occupation.

"Thank you for your warning of your intended visit," said Hooper in silky tones, indicating my bandana which lay on the table. "And now may I inquire to what I owe the honour of this call? Or it may be that the visit was not intended for me at all. Mistake in the rooms, perhaps. I often shift and change my quarters, and those of my household; especially if I suspect I have some reason for doing so. It adds interest to an otherwise unevenful life."

He was eying me sardonically, evidently gloating over the situation as he found it.

"How did you get on that roof? Who let you inside the walls?" he demanded abruptly.

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I merely smiled at him.

"That we can determine later," he observed, resuming command of himself.

I measured my chances, and found them at present a minus quantity. The old man was separated from me by a table, and he held my own revolver ready for instant use. So I stood tight and waited.

The room was an almost exact replica of the one in which I had spent the night so short a time before; the same long narrow transom near the ceiling, the same barred windows opening on the court, the same closet against the blank wall. Hooper had evidently inhabited it for some days, for it was filled with his personal belongings. Indeed he must have moved in *en bloc* when his ward had been moved out, for none of the furnishings showed the feminine touch, and several articles could have belonged only to the old man personally. Of such was a small iron safe in one corner and a tall old fashioned desk crammed with papers.

But if I decided overt action unwise at this moment, I decidedly went into action the next. Hooper whistled and four Mexicans appeared with ropes. Somehow I knew if they once hog-tied me I would never get another chance. Better dead now than helpless in the morning; for what that old buzzard might want of me.

One of them tossed a loop at me. I struck it aside and sailed in.

It had always been my profound and contemptuous belief that I could lick any four Mexicans. Now I had to take that back. I could not. But I gave them an argument; and by the time they had my elbows lashed behind me and

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my legs tied to the legs of one of those big solid chairs they like to name as "Mission style," I had marked them up and torn their pretty clothes and smashed a lot of junk around the place and generally got them so mad they would have knifed me in a holy second if it had not been for Old Man Hooper. The latter held up the lamp where it wouldn't get smashed and admonished the min no uncertain terms that he wanted me alive and comparatively undamaged. Oh sure! they mussed me up too. I wasn't very pretty either.

The bravos withdrew muttering curses, as the story books say; and after Hooper had righted the table and stuck the lamp on it, and taken a good look at my bonds he withdrew also.

Most of my time until the next thing occurred was occupied in figuring on all the things that might happen to me. One thing I acknowledged to myself right off the reel; the Mexicans had sure trussed me up for further orders! I could move my hands but I knew enough of ropes and ties to realize that my chances of getting free were exactly nothing. My plans had gone perfectly up to this moment. I had schemed to get inside the ranch and into Old Man Hooper's room; and here I was! What more could a man ask?

The next thing occurred so soon however, that I hadn't had time to think of more than ten per cent. of the things that might happen to me. The outside door opened to admit Hooper, followed by the girl. He stood aside in the most courtly fashion.

"My dear," he said, "Here is Mr. Sanborn, who has come

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to call on you. You remember Mr. Sanborn, I am sure. You met him at dinner; and besides, I believe, you had some correspondence with him, did you not? He has taken so much trouble, so very much trouble to see you that I think it a great pity his wish should not be fulfilled. Won't you sit down here, my dear?"

She was staring at me, her eyes gone wide with wonder and horror. Half thinking she took her seat as indicated. Instantly the old man had bound her elbows at the back and had lashed her to the chair. After the first start of surprise she made no resistance.

"There," said Hooper, straightening up after the accomplishment of this task, "Now I'm going to leave you to your visit. You can talk it all over. Tell him all you please, my dear. And you, sir, tell her all you know. I think I can arrange so your confidences will go no further."

For the first time I heard him laugh, a high uncertain cackle. The girl said nothing, but she stared at him with level blazing eyes. Also for the first time I began to take an interest in her.

"Do you object to smoking?" I asked her suddenly.

She blinked and recovered.

"Not at all," she answered.

"Well, then old man, be a sport. Give me the makings. I can get my hands to my mouth."

The old man transferred his baleful eyes on me. Then without saying a word he placed in my hands a box of tailor-made cigarettes and a dozen matches.

"Until morning," he observed, his hand on the door knob. He inclined in a most courteous fashion, first to the one of

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us, then to the other; and went out. He did not lock the door after him, and I could hear him addressing Cortinez outside. The girl started to speak, but I waved my shackled hand at her for silence. By straining my ears I could just make out what was said.

"I am going to bed," Hooper said. "It is not necessary to stand guard. You may get your blankets and sleep on the verandah."

After the old man's footsteps had died, I turned back to the girl opposite me and looked her over carefully. My first impression of meekness I revised. She did not look to me one bit meek. Her lips were compressed, her nostrils wide, her level eyes unsubdued. A person of sense, I said to myself, well balanced, who has learned when it is useless to kick against the pricks, but who has not necessarily on that account forever renounced all kicking. It occurred to me that she must have had to be pretty thoroughly convinced before she had come to this frame of mind. When she saw that I had heard all I wanted of the movements outside, she spoke hurriedly in her low sweet voice.

"Oh, I am so distressed! This is all my doings! I should have known better——"

"Now," I interrupted her decisively, "Let's get down to cases. You had nothing to do with this; nothing whatever. I visited this ranch the first time out of curiosity; and to-night because I knew that I'd have to hit first to save my own life. You had no influence on me in either case."

"You thought this was my room—I wrote you it was," she countered swiftly.

"I wanted to see you solely and simply that I might find

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out how to get at Hooper. This is all my fault; and we're going to cut out the self-accusations and get down to cases."

I afterwards realized that all this was somewhat inconsiderate and ungallant and slightly humiliating;—I should have taken the part of the knight-errant rescuing the damsel in distress, but at that moment only the direct essentials entered my mind.

"Very well," she assented in her repressed tones.

"Do you think he is listening to what we say; or has somebody listening?"

"I am positive not."

"Why?"

"I lived in this room for two months, and I know every inch of it."

"He might have some sort of a concealed listening hole somewhere, just the same."

"I am certain he has not. The walls are two feet thick."

"All right; let it go at that. Now let's see where we stand. In the first place, how do you dope this out?"

"What do you mean?"

"What does he intend to do with us?"

She looked me straight, eye to eye.

"In the morning he will kill you—unless you can contrive something."

"Cheering thought."

"There is no sense in not facing situations squarely. If there is a way out that is the only method by which it may be found."

"True," I agreed, my admiration growing. "And yourself; will he kill you, too?"

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"He will not. He does not dare!" she cried proudly with a flash of the eyes.

I was not so sure of that, but there was no object in saying so.

"Why has he tied you in that chair then,—along with the condemned?" I asked.

"You will understand better if I tell you who I am."

"You are his deceased partner's daughter; and everybody thinks you are in Europe," I started.

"How in the world did you know that? But no matter; it is true. I embarked three months ago on the Limited for New York intending, as you say, to go on a long trip to Europe. My father and I had been alone in the world. We were very fond of each other. I took no companion, nor did I intend to. I felt quite independent and able to take care of myself. At the last moment Mr. Hooper boarded the train. That was quite unexpected. He was on his way to the Ranch. He persuaded me to stop over for a few days to decide some matters. You know, since my father's death I am half owner."

"Whole owner," I murmured.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Go ahead. Sure you don't mind my smoking?" I lit one of the tailor-mades and settled back. Even my inexperienced youth recognized the necessity of relief this long continued stubborn repression must feel. My companion had as yet told me nothing I did not already know or guess; but I knew it would do her good to talk, and I might learn something valuable.

"We came out to the ranch, and talked matters over

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quite normally; but when it came time for my departure, I was not permitted to leave. For some unexplained reason I was a prisoner, confined absolutely to the four walls of this enclosure. I was guarded night and day; and I soon found I was to be permitted conversation with two men only, Mexicans named Ramon and Andreas."

"They are his right and left hand," I commented.

"So I found. You may imagine I did not submit to this until I found I had to. Then I made up my mind that the only possible thing to do was to acquiesce, to observe, and to wait my chance."

"You were right enough there. Why do you figure he did this?"

"I don't know!" she cried with a flash of thwarted despair. "I have wracked my brains, but I can find no motive. He has not asked me for a thing; he has not even asked me a question. Unless he's stark crazy, I cannot make it out!"

"He may be that," I suggested.

"He may be; and yet I doubt it somehow. I don't know why; but I *feel* that he is sane enough. He is inconceivably cruel and domineering. He will not tolerate a living thing about the place that will not or cannot take orders from him. He kills the flies, the bees, the birds, the frogs, because they are not his. I believe he would kill a man as quickly who stood out even for a second against him here. To that extent I believe he is crazy:—a sort of monomania. But not otherwise. That is why I say he will kill you; I really believe he would do it."

"So do I," I agreed grimly. "However, let's drop that

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for right now. Do you know a man named Brower, Artie Brower?"

"I don't think I ever heard of him. Why?"

"Never mind for a minute. I've just had a great thought strike me. Just let me alone a few moments while I work it out."

I lighted a second cigarette from the butt of the first and fell into a study. Cortinez breathed heavily outside. Otherwise the silence was as dead as the blackness of the night. The smoke from my cigarettes floated lazily until it reached the influence of the hot air from the lamp; then it shot upwards toward the ceiling. The girl watched me from under her level brows, always with that air of controlled restraint I found so admirable.

"I've got it," I said at last, "—or at least I think I have. Now listen to me, and believe what I've got to say. Here are the facts: first, your father and Hooper split partnership a while back. Hooper took his share entirely in cash; your father took his probably part in cash, but certainly all of the ranch and cattle. Get that clear? Hooper owns no part of the ranch and cattle. All right. Your father dies before the papers relating to this agreement are recorded. Nobody knew of those papers except your father and Hooper. So if Hooper were to destroy those papers, he'd still have the cash that had been paid him, and an equal share in the property. That plain?"

"Perfectly," she replied composedly. "Why didn't he destroy them?"

"Because they had been stolen by this man Brower I asked you about—an ex-jockey of Hooper's. Brower held

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them for blackmail. Unless Hooper came through Brower would record the papers."

"Where do I come in?"

"Easy. I'm coming to that. But answer me this: who would be your heir in case you died?"

"Why—I don't know?"

"Have you any kin?"

"Not a soul!"

"Did you ever make a will?"

"I never thought of such a thing!"

"Well, I'll tell you. If you were to die your interest in this property would go to Hooper."

"What makes you think so? I thought it would go to the state."

"I'm guessing." I acknowledged, "but I believe I'm guessing straight. A lot of these old Arizona partnerships were made just that way. Life was uncertain out here. I'll bet the old original partnership between your father and Hooper provides that in case of the extinction of one line, the other will inherit. It's a very common form of partnership in a new country like this. You can see for yourself it's a sensible thing to provide."

"You may be right," she commented. "Go on."

"You told me a while ago it was best to face any situation squarely. Now brace up and face this. You said a while ago that Hooper would not dare kill you. That is true for the moment. But there is no doubt in my mind that he has intended from the first to kill you, because by that he would get possession of the whole property."

"I cannot believe it!" she cried.

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"Isn't the incentive enough? Think carefully, and answer honestly; don't you think him capable of it?"

"Yes—I suppose so," she admitted reluctantly after a moment. She gathered herself as after a shock. "Why hasn't he done so? Why has he waited?"

I told her of the situation as it concerned Brower. While the dissolution of partnership papers still existed and might still be recorded, such a murder would be useless. For naturally the dissolution abrogated the old partnership agreement. The girl's share of the property would, at her demise intestate, go to the State. That is, provided the new papers were ever recorded.

"Then I am safe until——?" she began.

"Until he negotiates or otherwise settles with Brower. Until he has destroyed all evidence."

"Then everything seems to depend on this Brower," she said, knitting her brows anxiously. "Where is he?"

I did not answer this last question. My eyes were riveted on the door-knob which was slowly, almost imperceptibly turning. Cortinez continued to breathe heavily in sleep outside. The intruder was evidently at great pains not to awaken the guard. A fraction of an inch at a time the door opened. A wild haired wild eyed head inserted itself cautiously through the crack. The girl's eyes widened in surprise and, I imagine, a little in fear. I began to laugh, silently so as not to disturb Cortinez. Mirth overcame me; the tears ran down my cheeks.

"It's so darn complete!" I gasped answering the girl's horrified look of inquiry. "Miss Emery allow me to present Mr. Artie Brower!"

CHAPTER XIII

Brower entered the room quickly, but very quietly and at once came to me. His eyes were staring, his eyelids twitched, his hands shook. I recognized the symptoms.

"Have you got it? Have you got it with you?" he whispered feverishly.

"It's all right: I can fix you up. Untie me first." I replied.

He began to fumble with the knots of my bonds, too hastily and impatiently for effectiveness. I was trying to stoop over far enough to see what he was doing when my eye caught the shadow of a moving figure outside. An instant later Tim Westmore, the English groom attached to the Morgan stallion, came cautiously through the door, which he closed behind him. I attempted unobtrusively to warn Brower, but he only looked up, nodded vaguely and continued his fumbling efforts to free me. Westmore glanced at us all curiously, but went at once to the big windows, which he proceeded to swing shut. Then he came over to us, pushed Brower one side and most expeditiously untied the knots. I stood up stretching in the luxury of freedom, then turned to perform a like office for Miss Emory. But Brower was by now frantic. He seized my arm and fairly shook me, big as I was, in the urgency of his desire. He was rapidly losing all control and caution.

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"Let him have it, sir," urged Westmore in a whisper. "I'll free the young lady."

I gave Brower the hypodermic case. He ran to the wash bowl for water. During the process of preparation he uttered little animal sounds under his breath. When the needle had sunk home he lay back in a chair and closed his eyes.

In the meantime I had been holding a whispered colloquy with Westmore.

"He sneaked in on me at dark, sir," he told me, "On foot. I don't know how he got in without being seen. They'd have found his tracks anyway in the morning. I don't think he knew quite what he wanted to do. Him and me were old pals, and he wanted to ask me about things. He didn't expect to stay, I fancy. He told me he had left his horse tied a mile or so down the road. Then a while back orders came to close down, air tight. We're used to such orders. Nobody can go out or come in, you understand. And there are guards placed. That made him uneasy. He told me then he was a hop fiend. I've seen them before, and I got uneasy, too. If he came to the worst I might have to tie and gag him. I know how they are."

"Go ahead," I urged. He had stopped to listen.

"I don't like that Cortinez being so handy like out there," he confessed.

"Hooper told him he could sleep. He's not likely to pay attention to us. Miss Emery and I have been talking aloud."

"I hope not. Well then Ramon came by and stopped to talk to me for a minute. I had to hide Artie in a box-stall and hope to God he kept quiet. He wasn't as bad as he is

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now. Ramon told me about you being caught; and went on. After that nothing must do but find you. He thought you might have his dope. He'd have gone into the jaws of hell after it. So I came along to keep him out of mischief."

"What are you going to do now?" asked the girl, who had kicked off her slippers and had been walking a few paces to and fro.

"I don't know, ma'am. We've got to get away."

"We?"

"You mean me too?" Yes ma'am! I have stood with the doings of this place as long as I can stand them. Artie has told me some other things. Are you here of your free will ma'am?" he asked abruptly.

"No," she replied.

"I suspected as much. I'm through with the whole lot of them."

Brower opened his eyes. He was now quite calm.

"Hooper sold the Morgan stallion," he whispered, smiled sardonically, and closed his eyes again.

"Without telling me a word of it!" added Tim with heat. "He ain't delivered him yet."

"Well, I don't blame you. Now you'd better quietly sneak back to your quarters. There is likely to be trouble before we get through. You too, Brower. Nobody knows you are here."

Brower opened his eyes again.

"I can get out of this place now I've had me hop," said he decidedly. "Come on, let's go."

"We'll all go." I agreed, "But let's see what we can find here first. There may be some paper—or something——"

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"What do you mean? What sort of papers? Hadn't we better go at once?"

"It is supposed to be well known that the reason Hooper isn't assassinated from behind a bush is because in that case his killers are in turn to assassinate a long list of his enemies. Only nobody is sure: just as nobody is really sure that he has killers at all. You can't get action on an uncertainty."

She nodded. "I can understand that."

"If we could get proof positive it would be no trick at all to raise the country."

"What sort of proof?"

"Well, I mentioned a list. I don't doubt his head man—Ramon I suppose—the one he'd trust with carrying out such a job, must have a list of some sort. He wouldn't trust to memory."

"And he wouldn't trust it to Ramon until after he was dead!" said the girl with sudden intuition. "If it exists we'll find it here."

She started toward the paper-stuffed desk, but I stopped her.

"More likely the safe," said I.

Tim, who was standing near it, tried the handle.

"It's locked," he whispered.

I fell on my knees and began to fiddle with the dial, of course, in vain. Miss Emery with more practical decision of character began to run through the innumerable bundles and loose papers in the desk, tossing them aside as they proved unimportant or not germane to the issue. I had not the slightest knowledge of the constructions of safes

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but whirled the knob hopelessly in one direction or another trying to listen for clicks, as somewhere I had read was the thing to do. As may be imagined, I arrived no where. Nor did the girl. We looked at each other in chagrin at last.

"There is nothing here but ranch bills and accounts and business letters," she confessed.

I merely shook my head.

At this moment Brower, whom I had supposed to be sound asleep, opened his eyes.

"Want that safe open?" he asked drowsily.

He arose, stretched, and took his place beside me on the floor. His head cocked one side he slowly turned the dials with the tips of fingers, I for the first time noticed were long and slim and sensitive. Twice after extended delicate manipulations he whirled the knob impatiently and took a fresh start. On the proverbial third trial he turned the handle and the door swung open. He arose rather stiffly from his knees, resumed his place in the arm-chair, and again closed his eyes.

It was a small safe, with few pigeon holes. A number of blue covered contracts took small time for examination. There were the usual number of mine certificates not valuable enough for a safe deposit, some confidential memoranda and accounts having to do with the ranch.

"Ah, here is something!" I breathed, to the eager audience over my shoulder. I held in my hands a heavy manila envelope, sealed, inscribed "Ramon. (To be destroyed unopened.)"

"Evidently we were right: Ramon has the combination and is to be executor." I commented.

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I tore open the envelope and extracted from it another of the blue covered documents.

"It's a copy, unsigned, of that last agreement with your father," I said, after a disappointed glance. "It's worth keeping," and I thrust it inside my shirt.

But this particular pigeon hole proved to be a mine. In it were several more of the same sort of envelope, all sealed, all addressed to Ramon. One was labelled as the Last Will; one as Inventory; and one simply as Directions. This last had a further warning that it was to be opened only by the one addressed. I determined by hasty examination that the first two were only what they purported to be, and turned hopefully to a perusal of the last. It was in Spanish: and dealt at great length with the disposition and management of Hooper's extensive interests. I append a translation of the portion of this remarkable document, having to do with our case.

"These are my directions" it began, "as to the matter of which we have many times spoken together. I have many enemies, and many who think they have cause to wish my death. They are cowards and soft and I do not think they will ever be sure enough to do me harm. I do not fear them. But it may be that one or some of them will find it in their souls to do a deed against me. In that case I shall be content, for neither do I fear the devil. But I shall be content only if you follow my orders. I add here a list of my enemies and of those who have cause to wish me ill. If I am killed, it is probable that some one of these will have done the deed. Therefore they must all die. You must see to it, following them if necessary to the

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ends of the earth. You will know how; and what means to employ. When all these are gone, then go you to the highest rock on the southerly pinnacle of Cochise's Stronghold. Ten paces northwest is a gray flat slab. If you lift this slab there will be found a copper box. In the box is the name of a man. You will go to this man and give him the copper box and in return he will give to you one hundred thousand dollars. I know well, my Ramon, that you honestly would not permit you to seek the copper box before the last of my enemies is dead. Nevertheless, that you may admire my recourse, I have made an arrangement. If the gray slab on Cochise's Stronghold is ever disturbed before the whole toll is paid, you will die very suddenly and unpleasantly. I know well that you, My Ramon, would not disturb it; and I hope for your sake that nobody else will do so. It is not likely. No one is fool enough to climb Cochise's Stronghold for pleasure; and this gray slab is one among many."

At this time I did not read carefully the above cheerful document. My Spanish was good enough, but took time in the translating. I dipped into it enough to determine that it was what we wanted, and flipped the pages to come to the list of prospective victims. It covered two sheets, and a glance down the columns showed me that about every permanent inhabitant of the Soda Springs Valley was included. I found my own name in quite fresh ink toward the last.

"This is what we want," I said in satisfaction rising to my feet. I sketched in a few words the purport of the document.

"Let me see it" said the girl.

I handed it to her. She began to examine carefully the

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list of names, her face turning paler as she read. Tim Westmore looked anxiously over her shoulder. Suddenly I saw his face congest and his eyes bulge.

"Why! why!" he gasped "I'm there! What've I ever done, I ask you that? The old—" he choked, at a loss and groping. Then his anger flared up. "I've always served him faithful and done what I was told," he muttered fiercely. "I'll do him in for this!"

"I am here," observed Miss Emory.

"Yes, and that sot in the chair!" whispered Tim fiercely.

Again Brower proved he was not asleep by opening one eye.

"Thanks for them kind words," said he.

"We've got to get out of here," stated Tim with conviction.

"That idea just got through your thick British skull?" queried Artie, rousing again.

"I wish we had some way to carry the young lady:—she can't walk" said Westmore, paying no attention.

"I have my horse tied out by the lone joshua tree," I answered him,

"I'm going to take a look at that Cortinez," said the little Englishman nodding his satisfaction at my news as to the horse. "I'm not easy about him."

"He'll sleep like a log until morning." Miss Emory reassured me. "I've often stepped right over him where he has been on guard and walked all around the garden."

"Just the same I'm going to take a look" persisted Westmore.

He tiptoed to the door, softly turned the knob and opened it. He found himself face to face with Cortinez.

CHAPTER XIV

I had not thought of the English groom as a man of resource, but his action in this emergency proved him. He cast a fleeting glance over his shoulder. Artie Brower was huddled down in his armchair practically out of sight; Miss Amory and I had reseated ourselves in the only other two chairs in the room, so that we were in the same relative positions as when we had been bound and left. Only the confusion of the papers on the floor and the open safe would have struck an observant eye.

"It is well that you come," said Tim to Cortinez in Spanish. "The Señor sent me to conduct these two to the East Room and I like not the job alone. Enter."

He held the door with one hand and fairly dragged Cortinez through with the other. Instantly he closed the door and cast himself on Cortinez's back. I had already launched myself at the Mexican's throat.

The struggle was violent but brief. Fortunately I had not missed my spring at our enemy's windpipe, so he had been unable to shout. The noise of our scuffle sounded loud enough within the walls of the room; but those walls were two feet thick, and the door and windows closed.

"Get something to gag him with, and the cords," panted Tim to the girl.

Brower opened his eyes again.

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"I can beat that," he announced.

He produced his hypodermic and proceeded to mix a gunful of the dope.

"This'll fix him," he observed, turning back the Mexican's sleeve. "You can lay him outside and if anybody comes along they'll think he's asleep—as usual."

This we did, when the dope had worked.

It was now high time to think of our next move. For weapons we had the gun and knife taken from Cortinez and the miserable little automatic belonging to Brower. That was all. It was perfectly evident that we could not get out through the regular doorways; as, by Tim's statement, they were all closed and guarded. On my representation it was decided to try the roof.

We therefore knotted together the cord that had bound me, and two sheets from the bed; and sneaked cautiously out on the verandah, around the corner to the water barrel; and so to the vantage point of the roof.

The chill of the night was come; and the stars hung cold in the sky. It seemed that the air would snap and crackle were some little resolving element to be dropped into its suspended hush. Not a sound was to be heard except a slow drip of water from somewhere in the courtyard.

It was agreed that I, as the heaviest, should descend first. I landed easily enough and steadied the rope for Miss Amory who came next. While I was waiting I distinctly heard, from the direction of the willows, the hooting of an owl. Furthermore it was a Great Horned Owl, and he seemed to have a lot to say. You remember what I told you about setting your mind so that only one sort of noise will arouse

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it: but that one instantly? I knew perfectly well that Old Man Hooper's mind was set to all these smaller harmless noises that most people never notice at all, waking or sleeping—frogs, crickets, owls. And therefore I was convinced that sooner or later that old man and his foolish ideas and his shotgun would come projecting right across our well-planned getaway. Which was just what happened, and almost at once. Probably that Great Horned Owl had been hooting for some time, but we had been too busy to notice. I heard the wicket door turning on its hinges; and ventured a warning hiss to Brower and Tim Westmore, who had not yet descended. An instant later I could make out shadowy forms stealing toward the willows. Evidently those who served Old Man Hooper were accustomed to broken rest.

We kept very quiet, straining our eyes at the willows. After an interval a long stab of light pierced the dusk and the round denotation of old-fashioned black powder shook the silence. There came to us the babbling of voices released. At the same instant the newly-risen moon plastered us against that whitewashed wall like insects pinned in a cork-lined case. The moonlight must have been visibly creeping down to us for some few minutes, but so absorbed had I been in the doings of the party on the willows, and so chuckleheaded were the two on the roof, that actually none of us had noticed!

I dropped flat and dragged the girl down with me. But there remained that ridiculous plainly visible rope; and anyway a shout relieved me of any doubt as to whether we had been seen. Brower came tumbling down on us; and with

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one accord we three doubled to the right around the walls of the ranch. A revolver shot sang by us: but we were not immediately pursued. Our antagonists were too few and too uncertain of our numbers and arms.

It was up to us to utilize the few minutes before the ranch should be aroused. We doubled back through the willows and across the mesquite flat toward the lone joshua tree where I had left my horse. I held the girl's hand to help her when she stumbled, while Brower scuttled along with surprising endurance for a dope-wreck. Nobody said anything; but saved their wind.

"Where's Tim," I asked at a check when we had to scramble across a *barranca*.

"He went back into the ranch the way we came," replied Artie with some bitterness.

It was, nevertheless, the wisest thing he could have done. He had not been identified with this outfit except by Cortinez, and Cortinez was safe for twelve hours.

We found the joshua tree without difficulty.

"Now," said I, "here is the plan. You are to take these papers to Señor Buck Johnson, at the Box Springs Ranch. That's the next ranch on the fork of the road. Do you remember it?"

"Yes," said Brower, who had waked up and seemed quite sober and responsible. "I can get to it."

"Wake him up. Show him these papers. Make him read them. Tell him that Miss Amory and I are in the Bat-eye tunnel. Remember that?"

"The Bat-eye Tunnel," repeated Artie.

"Why don't *you* go?" inquired the girl anxiously.

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"I ride too heavy; and I know where the tunnel is," I replied. "If anybody else was to go, it would be you. But Artie rides light and sure: and he'll have to ride like hell. Here, put these papers inside your shirt. Be off!"

Lights were flickering at the ranch as men ran to and fro with lanterns. It would not take these skilled *vaqueros* long to catch their horses and saddle up. At any moment I expected to see the massive doors swing open to let loose the wolf pack.

Brower ran to my horse—a fool proceeding, especially for an experienced horse man—and jerked lose the tie rope. Badger is a good reliable cow horse; but he's not a million years old, and he's got some natural equine suspicions. I kind of lay a good deal of it to that fool hard-boiled rat. At any rate he snorted and sagged back on the rope, hit a yucca point, whirled and made off. Artie was game. He hung on until he was drug into a bunch of *chollas*, and then he had to let go. Badger departed into the distance, tail up and snorting.

"Well, you've done it now!" I observed to Brower, who, crying with nervous rage and chagrin, and undoubtedly considerably stuck up with *chollas* spines, was crawling to his feet.

"Can't we catch him? Won't he stop?" asked Miss Amory. "If he gets to the ranch, won't they look for you?"

"He's one of my range ponies: he won't stop short of the Gila."

I cast over the chances in my mind, weighing my knowledge of the country against the probabilities of search. The proportion was small. Most of my riding experience

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had been farther north and to the west. Such obvious hold-ups as the one I had suggested—the Bat-eye Tunnel—were of course familiar to our pursuers. My indecision must have seemed long, for the girl broke in anxiously on my meditations.

“Oughtn’t we to be moving?”

“As well here as anywhere,” I replied. “We are under good cover; and afoot we could not much better ourselves as against mounted men. We must hide.”

“But they may find the trampled ground where your horse has been tied.”

“I hope they do.”

“You hope they do!”

“Sure. They’ll figure that we must sure have moved away. They’ll never guess we’d hide near at hand. At least that’s what I hope.”

“How about tracks?”

“Not at night. By daylight maybe.”

“But then to-morrow morning they can——”

“To-morrow morning is a long way off.”

“Look!” cried Brower.

The big gates of the ranch had been thrown open. The glare of a light—probably a locomotive headlight—poured out. Mounted figures galloped forth and swerved to right or left, spreading in a circle about the enclosure. The horsemen reined to a trot and began methodically to quarter the ground, weaving back and forth. Four detached themselves and rode off at a swift gallop to the points of the compass. The mounted men were working fast for fear, I suppose, that we may have possessed horses. Another contin-

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gent, afoot and with lanterns, followed more slowly, going over the ground for indications. I could not but admire the skill and thoroughness of the plan.

"Our only chance is in the shadow from the moon," I told my companions. "If we can slip through the riders, and get in their rear, we may be able to follow the *barranca* down. Any of those big rocks will do. Lay low, and after a rider has gone over a spot, try to get to that spot without being seen."

We were not to be kept long in suspense. Out of all the three hundred and sixty degrees of the circle one of the swift outriders selected precisely our direction! Straight as an arrow he came for us, at full gallop. I could see the toss of his horse's mane against the light from the opened door. There was no time to move. All we could do was to cower beneath our rock, muscles tense, and hope to be able to glide around the shadow as he passed.

But he did not pass. Down into the shallow *barranca* he slid with a tinkle of shale, and drew rein within ten feet of our lurking place.

We could hear the soft snorting of his mount above the thumping of our hearts. I managed to get into a position to steal a glimpse. It was difficult but at length I made out the statuesque-lines of the horse, and the rider himself, standing in his stirrups and leaning slightly forward, peering intently about him. The figures were in silhouette against the sky, but nobody ever fooled me as to a horse. It was the Morgan Stallion, and the rider was Tim Westmore. Just as the realization came to me, Tim uttered a low impatient whistle.

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It's always a good idea to take a chance. I arose into view—but I kept my gun handy.

"Thank God!" cried Tim fervently, under his breath. "I remembered you'd left your horse by this joshua: it's the only landmark in the dark. Saints!" he ejaculated in dismay as he saw us all, "Where's your horse?"

"Gone."

"We can't all ride this stallion——"

"Listen," I cut in: and I gave him the same directions I had previously given Brower. He heard me attentively.

"I can beat that," he cut me off. He dismounted. "Get on here, Artie. Ride down the *barranca* two hundred yards and you'll come to an alkali flat. Get out on that flat and ride like hell for Box Springs."

"Why don't you do it?"

"I'm going back and tell 'em how I was slugged and robbed of my horse."

"They'll kill you if they suspect: dare you go back?"

"I've been back once," he pointed out! He was helping Brower aboard.

"Where you get that bag?" he asked.

"Found it by the rock where we were hiding: it's mine," replied Brower.

Westmore tried to get him to leave it, but the little jockey was obstinate. He kicked his horse and, bending low, rode away.

"You're right: I beg your pardon." I answered Westmore's remark to me "You don't look slugged."

"That's easy fixed," said Tim calmly. He removed his hat and hit his forehead a very solid blow against a pro-

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jection of the conglomerate boulder. The girl screamed slightly.

"Hush!" warned Tim in a fierce whisper. He raised his hand toward the approaching horsemen, who were now very near. Without attention to the blood streaming from his brow he bent his head to listen to the faint clinking of steel against rock that marked the stallion's progress toward the alkali flat. The searchers were by now dangerously close, and Tim uttered a smothered oath of impatience. But at last we distinctly heard the faint soft thud of galloping hoofs.

The searchers heard it too, and reined up to listen. Tim thrust into my hand the 30-30 Winchester he was carrying together with a box of cartridges. Then with a leap like a tiger he gained the rim of the *barranca*. Once, there, however, his forces seemed to desert him. He staggered forward calling in a weak voice. I could hear the volley of rapid questions shot at him by the men who immediately surrounded him; and his replies. Then somebody fired a revolver thrice in rapid succession and the whole cavalcade swept away with a mighty crackling of brush. Immediately after Tim rejoined us. I had not expected this.

Relieved for the moment we hurried Miss Amory rapidly up the bed of the shallow wash. The tunnel mentioned was part of an old mine operation, undertaken at some remote period before the cattle days. It entered the base of one of those isolated conical hills, lying like islands in the plain, so common in Arizona. From where we had hidden, it lay about three miles to the northeast. It was a natural and

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obvious hide out, and I had no expectation of remaining unmolested. My hope lay in rescue.

We picked our way under cover of the ravine as long as we could; then struck boldly across the plain. Nobody seemed to be following us. A wild hope entered my heart that perhaps they might believe we had all made our escape to Box Springs.

As we proceeded the conviction was borne in on me that the stratagen had at least saved us from immediate capture. Like most men who ride I had very sketchy ideas of what three miles afoot is like—at night—in high heels. The latter affliction was common to both Miss Amory and myself. She had on a sort of bedroom slipper, and I wore the usual cowboy boots. We began to go footsore about the same time, and the little rolling volcanic rocks among the bunches of *sacatone* did not help us a bit. Tim made good time, curse him. Or rather, bless him; for as I just said, if he had not tolled away our mounted pursuit we would have been caught as sure as God made little green apples. He seemed as lively as a cricket, in spite of the dried blood across his face.

The moon was now sailing well above the horizon throwing the world into silver and black velvet. When we moved in the open we showed up like a train of cars; but on the other hand the shadow was a cloak. It was by now nearly one o'clock in the morning.

Miss Amory's nerve did not belie the clear steadfast look of her eye; but she was about all in when we reached the foot of Bat-eye-Butte. Tim and I had discussed the procedure as we walked. I was for lying in wait outside; but Tim pointed out that the tunnel entrance was well down in

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the boulders, that even the sharpest outlook could not be sure of detecting an approach through the shadows, and that from the shelter of the roof props and against the light we should be able to hold off a large force almost indefinitely. In any case we would have to gamble on Brower's winning through, and having sense enough in his opium-saturated mind to make a convincing yarn of it. So after a drink at the *tenaja* below the mine, we entered the black square of the tunnel.

The work was old, but it had been well done. They must have dragged the timbers down from the White Mountains. Indeed a number of unused beams; both trunks of trees and squared, still lay around outside. From time to time, since the original operations, some locoed prospector comes projecting along and does a little work in hopes he may find something the other fellow had missed. So the passage was crazy with props and supports, new and old, placed to brace the ageing overhead timbers. Going in they were a confounded nuisance against the bumped head; but looking back toward the square of light they made fine protections behind which to crouch. In this part of the country any tunnel would be dry. It ran straight for about a hundred and fifty feet.

We groped our way about seventy-five feet, which was as far as we could make out the opening distinctly, and sat down to wait. I still had the rest of the tailor made cigarettes, which I shared with Tim. We did not talk, for we wished to listen for sounds outside. To judge by her breathing, I think Miss Amory dozed, or even went to sleep.

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About an hour later I thought to hear a single tinkle of shale. Tim heard it too, for he nudged me. Our straining ears caught nothing further however; and I, for one, had relaxed from my tension when the square of light was darkened by a figure. I was nearest, so I raised Cortinez's gun and fired. The girl uttered a scream, and the figure disappeared. I don't know yet whether I hit him or not; we never found any blood.

We made Miss Amory lie down behind a little slide of rock, and disposed ourselves under shelter.

"We can take them as fast as they come," exulted Tim.

"I don't believe there are over two or three of them," I observed. "It would be only a scouting party. They will go for help."

As there was no longer reason for concealment, we talked aloud and freely.

Now ensued a long waiting interim. We could hear various sounds outside as of moving to and fro. The enemy had likewise no reason for further concealment.

"Look!" suddenly cried Tim, "Something crawling."

He raised the 30-30 and fired. Before the flash and the fumes had blinded me I too had seen indistinctly something low and prone gliding around the corner of the entrance. That was all we could make out of it; for as you can imagine the light was almost non-existent. The thing glided steadily, untouched or unmindful of the shots we threw at it. When it came to the first of the crazy uprights supporting the roof timbers it seemed to hesitate gropingly. Then it drew slowly back a foot or so, and darted forward.

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The ensuing thud enlightened us. The thing was one of the long squared timbers we had noted outside; and it was being used as a battering ram.

"They'll bring the whole mountain down on us!" cried Tim springing forward.

But even as he spoke, and before he had moved two feet, that catastrophe seemed at least to have begun. The prop gave way: the light at the entrance was at once blotted out; the air was filled with terrifying roaring echoes. There followed a succession of crashes, the rolling of rocks over each other, the grinding slide of avalanches great and small. We could scarcely breathe for the dust. Our danger was that now the thing was started it would not stop: that the antique and inadequate supports would all give way, one bringing down the other in succession until we were buried. Would the forces of equilibrium establish themselves through the successive slight resistances of these rotted worm eaten old timbers before the constricted space in which we crouched should be entirely eaten away?

After the first great crash there ensued a moment's hesitation. Then a second span succumbed. There followed a series of minor chutes with short intervening silences. At last so long an interval of calm ensued that we plucked up courage to believe it all over. A single stone rolled a few feet and hit the rock floor with a bang. Then, immediately after, the first deafening thunder was repeated as evidently another span gave way. It sounded as though the whole mountain had moved. I was almost afraid to stretch out my hand for fear it would encounter the wall of débris. The roar ceased as abruptly as it had begun. Followed then a

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long silence. Then a little cascading tinkle of shale. And another dead silence.

"I believe it's over," ventured Miss Amory, after a long time.

"I'm going to find out how bad it is," I asserted.

I moved forward cautiously, my arms extended before me, feeling my way with my feet. Foot after foot I went, encountering nothing but the props. Expecting as I did to meet an obstruction within a few paces at most, I soon lost my sense of distance: after a few moments it seemed to me that I must have gone much farther than the original length of the tunnel. At last I stumbled over a fragment; and so found my fingers against a rough mass of débris.

"Why, this is fine!" I cried to the others, "I don't believe more than a span or so has gone!"

I struck one of my few remaining matches to make sure. While of course I had no very accurate mental image of the original state of things, still it seemed to me there was an awful lot of tunnel left. As the whole significance of our situation came to me, I laughed aloud.

"Well," said I cheerfully. "They couldn't have done us a better favour! It's a half hour's job to dig us out, and in the meantime we are safe as a covered bridge. We don't even have to keep watch."

"Provided Brower gets through," the girl reminded us.

"He'll get through," assented Tim positively. "There's nothing on four legs can catch that Morgan stallion."

I opened my watch crystal and felt of the hands. Half past two.

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"Four or five hours before they can get here," I announced.

"We'd better go to sleep, I think," said Miss Amory.

"Good idea," I approved. "Just pick your rocks and go to it."

I sat down and leaned against one of the uprights, expecting fully to wait with what patience I might the march of events. Sleep was the farthest thing from my thoughts. When I came to I found myself doubled on my side with a short piece of ore sticking in my ribs and eighteen or twenty assorted cramp-pains in various parts of me. This was all my consciousness had room to attend to for a few moments. Then I became dully aware of faint tinkling sounds and muffled shoutings from the outer end of the tunnel. I shouted in return and made my way as rapidly as possible toward the late entrance.

A half hour later we crawled cautiously through a precarious opening and stood blinking at the sunlight.

CHAPTER XV

A group of about twenty men greeted our appearance with a wild cowboy yell. Some of the men of our outfit were there, but not all; and I recognized others from as far south as the Chiracahuas. Windy Bill was there with Jed Parker; but Señor Johnson's bulky figure was nowhere to be seen. The other men were all riders—nobody of any particular standing or authority. The sun made it about three o'clock of the afternoon. Our adventures had certainly brought us a good sleep!

After we had satisfied our thirst from a canteen we began to ask and answer questions. Artie Brower had made the ranch without mishap, had told his story, and had promptly fallen asleep. Buck Johnson, in his usual deliberate manner, read all the papers through twice; pondered for some time while the more excited Jed and Windy fidgetted impatiently; and then, his mind made up, acted with his customary decision. Three men he sent to reconnoiter in the direction of the Bat-eye Tunnel with instructions to keep out of trouble and to report promptly. His other riders he dispatched with an insistent summons to all the leading cattlemen as far south as the Chiracahua Range, as far east as Grant's Pass, as far west as Madrona. Such was Buck Johnson's reputation for level-headedness that without hesitation these men saddled and rode at their best

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speed. By noon the weightiest of the Soda Spring Valley had gathered in conclave.

"That's where we faded out," said Jed Parker. "They sent us up to see about you-all. The scouts from up here come back with their little Wild West story about knocking down this yere mountain on top of you. We had to believe them because they brought back a little proof with them. Mex guns and spurs and such plunder looted off'n the deceased on the field of battle. Bill here can tell you."

"They was only two of them," said Windy Bill, diffident for the first time in his life, "and we managed to catch one of 'em foul."

"We been digging here for too long. We ain't no prairie dogs to go delving into the bosom of the earth. We thought you must be plumb deceased anyhow: we couldn't get a peep out of you. I was in favour of leavin' you lay myself. This yere Butte seemed like a first rate imposing tomb; and I was willing myself to carve a few choice sentiments on some selected rock. Sure I can carve! But Jed here allowed that you owed him ten dollars and maybe had some money in your pocket——"

"Shut up, Windy," I broke in, "Can't you see the young lady——"

Windy whirled all contrition and apologies.

"Don't you mind me, ma'am," he begged, "They call me Windy Bill, and I reckon that's about right. I don't mean nothing. And we'd have dug all through this butte before——"

"I know that. It isn't your talk," interrupted Miss Amory, "but the sun is hot—and—haven't you anything at all to eat?"

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"Suffering giraffes!" cried Windy above the chorus of dismay. "Lunkheads! chumps! Of all the idiot plays ever made in this territory!" He turned to the dismayed group. "Ain't any one of you boys had sense enough to bring any grub?"

But nobody had. The old fashioned Arizona cowboy ate only twice a day. It would never occur to him to carry a lunch for noon. Still they might have considered a rescue party's probable needs.

We mounted and started for the Box Springs Ranch. They had at least known enough to bring extra horses.

"Old Hooper knows the cat is out of the bag now," I suggested as we rode along.

"He sure does."

"Do you think he'll stick: or will he get out?"

"He'll stick."

"I don't know——" I argued doubtfully.

"I do," with great positiveness.

"Why are you so sure?"

"There are men in the brush all around his ranch to see that he does."

"For heaven's sake how many have you got together?" I cried, astonished.

"About three hundred," said Jed.

"What's the plan?"

"I don't know. They were chewing over it when I left. But I'll bet something's going to pop. There's a bunch of 'em on that sweet little list you-all dug up."

We rode slowly. It was near five o'clock when we pulled down the lane toward the big corrals. The latter were full

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of riding horses, and the fences were topped with neatly arranged saddles. Men were everywhere, seated in rows on top rails, gathered in groups, leaning idly against the ranch buildings. There was a feeling of waiting.

We were discovered and acclaimed with a wild yell that brought everybody running. Immediately we were surrounded. Escorted by a clamouring multitude we moved slowly down the lane and into the enclosure.

There awaited us a dozen men, headed by Buck Johnson. They emerged from the office as we drew up. At sight of them the cowboys stopped, and we moved forward alone. For here were the substantial men of this part of the territory, the Old Timers, who had come in the early days and who had persisted through the Indian wars, the border forays, the cattle rustlings, through drought and enmity and bad years. A grim elderly four square unsmiling little band of granite-faced pioneers, their very appearance carried a conviction of direct and, if necessary, ruthless action. At sight of them my heart leaped. Twenty-four hours previous my case had seemed none too joyful. Now, mainly by my own efforts, after all, I was no longer alone.

They did not waste time in vain congratulations or query. The occasion was too grave for such side issues. Buck Johnson said something very brief to the effect that he was glad to see us safe.

"If this young lady will come in first," he suggested.

But I was emboldened to speak up.

"This young lady has not had a bite to eat since last night," I interposed.

The senior bent on me his grave look.

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"Thank you," said he, "Sing!" he roared: and then to the Chinaman who showed up in a nervous hover: "Give this lady grub, savy? If you'll go with him ma'am, he'll get you up something. Then we'd like to see you."

"I can perfectly well wait——" she began.

"I'd rather not, ma'am," said Buck with such grave finality that she merely bowed and followed the cook.

CHAPTER XVI

They had no tender feelings about me, however. Nobody cared whether I ever ate or not. I was led into the little ranch office and catechized to a fare-ye-well. They sat and roosted and squatted about, emitting solemn puffs of smoke and speaking never a word; and the sun went down in shafts of light through the murk, and the old shadows of former days crept from the corners. When I had finished my story it was dusk.

And on the heels of my recital came the sound of hoofs in a hurry; and presently loomed in the doorway the gigantic figure of Tom Thorne, the sheriff. He peered, seeing nothing through the smoke and the twilight; and the old timers sat tight and smoked.

"Buck Johnson here?" asked Thorne in his big voice.

"Here," replied the Señor.

"I am told," said Thorne directly, "that there is here an assembly for unlawful purposes. If so, I call on you in the name of the law to keep the peace."

"Tom," rejoined Buck Johnson, "I want you to make me your deputy."

"For what purpose?"

"There is a dispossession notice to be served hereabouts; a trespasser who must be put off from property that is not his."

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"You men are after Hooper, and I know it. Now you can't run your neighbours' quarrels with a gun, not any more. This is a country of law now."

"Tom," repeated Buck in a reasoning tone, "Come in. Strike a light if you want to: and take a look around. There's lot of your friends here. There's Jim Carson over in the corner, and Donald Macomber, and Marcus Malley, and Dan Watkins."

At this slow telling of the most prominent names in the southwest cattle industry Tom Thorne took a step into the room and lighted a match. The little flame, held high above his head, burned down to his fingers while he stared at the impassive faces surrounding him. Probably he had thought to interfere dutifully in a local affair of considerable seriousness; and there is no doubt that Tom Thorne was never afraid of his duty. But here was Arizona itself gathered for purposes of its own. He hardly noticed when the flame scorched his fingers.

"Tom," said Buck Johnson after a moment, "I heerd tell of a desperate criminal headed for Grant's Pass, and I figure you can just about catch up with him if you start right now and keep on riding. Only you'd better make me your deputy first. It'll sort of leave things in good legal responsible hands, as you can always easy point out if asked."

Tom gulped.

"Raise your right hand," he commanded curtly, and administered the oath. "Now I leave it in your hands to preserve the peace," he concluded, "I call you all to witness."

"That's all right, Tom," said Buck, still in his crooning

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tones, taking the big sheriff by the elbow and gently propelling him toward the door, "now as to this yere criminal over towards Grant's Pass, he was a little bit of a runt about six foot three tall; heavy set, weight about a hundred and ten; light complected with black hair and eyes. You can't help but find him. Tom's a good sort," he observed, coming back, "but he's young. He don't realize yet that when things get real serious this sheriff foolishness just nat'rally bogs down. Now I reckon we'd better talk to the girl."

I made a beeline for the cook house while they did that and filled up for three. By the time I had finished, the conference was raised, and men were catching and saddling their mounts. I did not intend to get left out, you may be sure, so I rustled around and borrowed me a saddle and a horse, and was ready to start with the rest.

We jogged up the road in a rough sort of column, the old timers riding ahead in a group of their own. No injunction had been laid as to keeping quiet; nevertheless conversation was sparse and low voiced. The men mostly rode in silence smoking their cigareets. About half way the leaders summoned me, and I trotted up to join them.

They wanted to know about the situation of the ranch as I had observed it. I could not encourage them much. My recollection made of the place a thoroughly protected walled fortress, capable of resisting a considerable assault.

"Of course with this gang we could sail right over them," observed Buck thoughtfully, "but we'd lose a considerable of men doing it."

"Ain't no chance of sneaking somebody inside?" suggested Watkins.

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"Got to give Old Man Hooper credit for some sense," replied the señor shortly.

"We can starve 'em out," suggested somebody.

"Unless I miss the old man a mile he's already got a messenger headed for the troops at Fort Huachuca," interposed Macomber, "He ain't fool enough to take chances on a local sheriff."

"You're tooting he ain't," approved Buck Johnson, "It's got to be quick work."

"Burn him out," said Watkins.

"It's the young lady's property," hesitated my boss, "I kind of hate to destroy it unless we have to."

At this moment the Morgan Stallion, which I had not noticed before, was reined back to join our little group. Atop him rode the diminutive form of Artie Brower whom I had thought down and out. He had evidently had his evening's dose of hop and under the excitation of the first effect had joined the party. His derby hat was flattened down to his ears. Somehow it exasperated me.

"For heaven's sake why don't you get you a decent hat!" I muttered, but to myself. He was carrying that precious black bag.

"Blow a hole in his old walls!" he suggested cheerfully. "That old fort was built against Injins. A man could sneak up in the shadow and set her off. It wouldn't take but a dash of soup to stick a hole you could ride through a horse-back."

"Soup?" echoed Buck.

"Nitroglycerine," explained Watkins, who had once been a miner.

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"Oh, sure!" agreed Buck sarcastically, "And where'd we get it."

"I always carry a little with me just for emergencies," asserted Brower calmly and patted his black bag.

There was a sudden and unanimous edging away.

"For the love of Pete!" I cried, "Was there some of that stuff in there all the time I've been carrying it around?"

"It's packed good: it can't go off," Artie reassured us. "I know my biz."

"What in God's name do you want such stuff for!" cried Judson.

"Oh, just emergencies," answered Brower vaguely: but I remembered his uncanny skill in opening the combination of the safe. Possibly that contract between Amory and Hooper had come into his hands through professional activities. However, that did not matter.

"I can make a drop of soup go farther than other men a pint," boasted Artie, "I'll show you: and I'll show that old——"

"You'll probably get shot," observed Buck, watching him closely.

"W'at t'hell," observed Artie with an airy gesture.

"It's the dope he takes," I told Johnson aside, "It only lasts about so long. Get him going before it dies on him."

"I see. Trot right along." Buck commanded.

Taking this as permission Brower clapped heels to the stallion and shot away like an arrow.

"Hold on! Stop! Oh damn!" ejaculated the Señor. "He'll gum the whole game!" He spurred forward in pursuit, realized the hopelessness of trying to catch the Morgan

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and reined down again to a brisk travelling canter. We surmounted the long slow rise this side of Hoopers in time to see a man stand out in the brush, evidently for the purpose of challenging the horseman. Artie paid him not the slightest attention, but swept by magnificently, the great stallion leaping high in his restrained vitality. The outpost promptly levelled his rifle. We saw the vivid flash in the half light. Brower reeled in his saddle, half fell, caught himself by the stallion's mane and clung, swinging to and fro. The horse, freed of control, tossed his head, laid back his ears, and ran straight as an arrow for the great doors of the ranch.

We uttered a simultaneous groan of dismay. Then with one accord we struck spurs and charged at full speed, grimly and silently. Against the gathering hush of evening rose only the drum-roll of our horses' hoofs and the dust cloud of their going. Except that Buck Johnson, rising in his stirrups, let off three shots in the air; and at the signal from all points around the beleaguered ranch men arose from the brush and mounted concealed horses, and rode out into the open with rifles poised.

The stallion thundered on; and the little jockey managed to cling to the saddle, though how he did it none of us could tell. In the bottom land near the ranch he ran out of the deeper dusk into a band of the strange luminous after-glow that follows erratically sunset in wide spaces. Then we could see that he was not only holding his seat, but was trying to do something, just what we could not make out. The reins were flying free, so there was no question of regaining control.

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A shot flashed at him from the ranch; then a second; after which, as though at command, the firing ceased. Probably the condition of affairs had been recognized.

All this we saw from a distance. The immensity of the Arizona country, especially at dusk when the mountains withdraw behind their veils and mystery flows into the bottomlands, has always a panoramic quality that throws small any human-sized activities. The ranch houses and their attendant trees look like toys; the bands of cattle and the men working them are as though viewed through the reverse lenses of a glass; and the very details of mesquite or *sacatone* flats, of alkali shallow or of oak grove are blended into broad washes of tone. But now the distant galloping horse with its swaying mannikin charging on the ranch seemed to fill our world. The great forces of portent that hover aloof in the dusk of the desert, stooped as with a rush of wings. The peaceful wide spaces and the veiled hills and the brooding skies were swept clear. Crisis filled our souls: crisis laid her hand on every living moving thing in the world, stopping it in its tracks so that the very infinities for a brief wierd period seemed poised over the running horse and the swaying fumbling man.

At least that is the way it affected me; and subsequent talk leads me to believe that that it is how it affected every man jack of us. We all had different ways of expressing it. Windy Bill subsequently remarked; "I felt like some old Injun He-God had just told me to crawl in my hole and give them that knew how a chanct."

But I know we all stopped short, frozen in our tracks, and stared, and I don't believe man, *or* horse, drew a deep breath.

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Nearer and nearer the stallion drew to the ranch. Now he was within a few yards. In another moment he would crash head on, at tremendous speed, into the closed massive doors. The rider seemed to have regained somewhat of his strength. He was sitting straight in the saddle, was no longer clinging. But apparently he was making no effort to regain control. His head was bent and he was still fumbling at something; The distance was too great for us to make out what, but that much we could see.

On flew the stallion at undiminished speed. He was running blind; and seemingly nothing could save him from a crash. But at almost the last moment the great doors swung back. Those within had indeed realized the situation and were meeting it. At the same instant Brower rose in his stirrups and brought his arm forward in a wide free swing. A blinding glare flashed across the world. We felt the thud and heave of a tremendous explosion. Dust obliterated everything.

"Charge, you coyotes! Charge!" shrieked Buck Johnson.

And at full speed, shrieking like fiends we swept across flats.

CHAPTER XVII

There was no general resistance. We tumbled pell mell through the breach into the courtyard, encountering only terror-stricken wretches who cowered still dazed by the unexpectedness and force of the explosion. In the excitement order and command were temporarily lost. The men swarmed through the ranch buildings like locusts. Señor Buck Johnson and the other old timers let them go; but I noticed they themselves scattered here and there keeping a restraining eye on activities. There was to be no looting: and that was early made plain.

But before matters had a chance to go very far, we were brought up all standing by the sound of shots outside. A rush started in that direction: but immediately Buck Johnson asserted his authority and took command. He did not intend to have his men shot unnecessarily.

By now it was pitch dark. A reconnaissance disclosed a little battle going on down toward the water corrals. Two of our men, straying in that direction, had been fired upon. They had promptly gone down on their bellies and were shooting back.

"I think they've got down behind the water troughs," one of these men told me as I crawled up alongside. "Cain't say how many there is. They shore do spit fire considerable. I'm just cuttin' loose where I see the flash. When

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I shoot, you prepare to move and move lively. One of those horned toads can sure shoot some; and it ain't healthy to linger none behind your own flash."

The boys, when I crawled back with my report, were eager to pile in and rush the enemy.

"Just put us a hoss-back, Señor," pleaded Windy Bill, "and we'll run right over them like a Shanghai rooster over a little green snake. They can't hit nothing moving fast in the dark."

"You'll do just what I say," rejoined Buck Johnson fiercely. "Cow hands are scarce, and I don't aim to lose one except in the line of business. If any man gets shot to-night, he's out of luck. He'd better get shot good and dead; or he'll wish he had been. That goes! There can't be but a few of those renegades out there, and we'll tend to them in due order. Watkins," he addressed that old-timer, "You tend to this. Feel around cautious. Fill up the place full of lead. Work your men around through the brush until you get them surrounded, and then just squat and shoot and wait for morning."

Watkins sent out a dozen of the nearest men to circle the water troughs in order to cut off further retreat, if that were projected. Then he went about methodically selecting others to whom he assigned various stations.

"Now you get a-plenty of catteridges," he told them, "and you lay low and shoot 'em off. And if any of you gets shot I'll sure skin him alive!"

In the meantime the locomotive lantern had been lit so that the interior of the courtyard was thrown into brilliant light. Needless to say the opening blown in the walls did

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not face toward the water corrals. Of Artie Brower and the Morgan Stallion we found hardly a trace. They had been literally blown to pieces. Not one of us who had known him but felt in his heart a kindly sorrow for the strange little man. The sentry who had fired at him and who had thus, indirectly, precipitated the catastrophe was especially downcast.

"I told him to stop, and he kep' right on a-going, so I shot at him," he explained. "What else was I to do? How was I to know he didn't belong to that gang? He acted like it."

But when you think of it how could it have come out better? Poor, weak, vice-ridden likeable little beggar, what could the future have held for him? And it is probable that his death saved many lives.

The prisoners were brought in—some forty of them, for Old Man Hooper maintained only the home ranch and all his cowhands as well as his personal bravos were gathered here. Buck Johnson separated apart seven of them, and ordered the others into the stables under guard.

"Bad *hombres*, all of them," he observed to Jed Parker. "We'll just nat'rally ship them across the line very *pronto*. But these seven are worse than bad *hombres*. We'll have to see about them."

But niether Andreas, Ramon nor Old Man Hooper himself were among those present.

"Maybe they slipped out through our guards; but I doubt it," said Buck. "I believe we've identified that peevish lot by the water troughs."

The firing went on quite briskly for a while; then slack-

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ened, and finally died to an occasioned burst, mainly from our own side. Under our leader's direction the men fed their horses and made themselves comfortable. I was summoned to the living quarters to explain on the spot the events that had gone before. Here we examined more carefully and in detail the various documents—the extraordinary directions to Ramon: the list of prospective victims to be offered at the tomb, so to speak, of Old Man Hooper; and the copy of the agreement between Amory and Hooper. The latter, as I had surmised, stated in so many words that it superceded and nullified an old partnership agreement. This started us on a further search which was at last rewarded by the discovery of that original partnership. It contained, again as I had surmised, the not uncommon clause that in case of the death of one or the other of the partners without direct heirs the common property should revert to the other. I felt very stuck on myself for a good guesser. The only trouble was that the original of the second agreement was lacking: we had only a copy, and of course without signatures. It will be remembered that Brower said he had deposited it with a third party: and that third party was to us unknown. We could not even guess in what city he lived. Of course we could advertise. But Windy Bill who—leaning his long figure against the wall—had been listening in silence—a pretty fair young miracle in itself—, had a good idea; which was the real miracle, in my estimation.

“Look here!” he broke in, “if I’ve been following the plot of this yere dime novel correctly, its plumb easy. Just catch Jud—Jud—you know, the editor of the *Cochise*

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Branding Iron, and get him to telegraph a piece to the other papers that Artie Brower celebrated jockey et cetera has met a violent death at Hooper's Ranch, details as yet unknown. That's the catch-word, as I *savey* it. When this yere third party sees that, he goes and records the paper, and there you are!"

Windy leaned back dramatically and looked exceedingly pleased with himself.

"Yes, that's it," approved Buck briefly, which disappointed Windy, who was looking for high enconium.

At this moment a messenger came in from the firing party to report that apparently all opposition had ceased. At least there had been for some time no shooting from the direction of the water troughs; a fact concealed from us by the thickness of the ranch walls. Buck Johnson immediately went out to confer with Watkins.

"I kind of think we've got 'em all," was the latter's opinion. "We haven't had a sound out of 'em for a half hour. It may be a trick of course."

"Sure they haven't slipped by you?" suggested the Señor.

"Pretty certain. We've got a close circle."

"Well, I wouldn't take chances in the dark. Just lay low 'till morning."

We returned to the ranch house where, after a little further discussion, I bedded down and immediately fell into a deep sleep. This was more and longer continued excitement than I was used to.

I was afoot with the first stirrings of dawn, you may be sure, and out to join the party that moved with infinite

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precaution on the water troughs as soon as it was light enough to see clearly. We found them riddled with bullets and the water all run out. Gleaming brass cartridges scattered catching the first rays of the sun attested the vigour of the defense. Four bodies lay huddled on the ground under the partial shelter of the troughs. I saw Ramon, his face frowning and sinister even in death, his right hand still grasping tenaciously the stock of his Winchester; and Andreas flat on his face; and two others whom I did not recognize. Ramon had been hit at least four times. But of Hooper himself was no hide nor hair! So certain had we been that he had escaped to this spot with his familiars that we were completely taken aback at his absence.

"We got just about as much sense as a bunch of sheepmen!" cried Buck Johnson, exasperated. "He's probably been hiding out somewhere about the place. God knows where he is by now!"

But just as we were about to return to the ranch house we were arrested by a shout from one of the cowboys who had been projecting around the neighbourhood. He came running to us. In his hand he held a blade of *sacatone* on which he pointed out a single dark spot about the size of the head of a pin. Buck seized it and examined it closely.

"Blood all right," he said at last, "Where did you get this, son?"

The man, a Chiracahua hand named Curley something-or-other indicated a *sacatone* bottom a hundred yards to the west.

"You got good eyes, son," Buck complimented him. "Think you can make out the trail?"

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"Do'no," said Curley. "Used to do a considerable of tracking."

"Horses!" commanded Buck.

We followed Curley afoot while several men went to saddle up. On the edge of the two foot jump-off we grouped ourselves waiting while Curley, his brows knit tensely, quartered here and there like a setter dog. He was a good trailer, you could see that in a minute. He went at it right. After quite a spell he picked up a rock and came back to show it. I should never have noticed anything—merely another tiny black spot among other spots,—but Buck nodded instantly he saw it.

"It's about ten rods west of whar I found the grass," said Curley. "Looks like he's headed for that water in Cockeye Basin. From thar he could easy make Cochise when he got rested."

"Looks likely," agreed Buck. "Can't you find no foot-prints?"

"Too much tramped up by cowboys and other jack-asses," said Curley. "It'll come easier when we get outside this yere battlefield."

He stood erect sizing up the situation through half squinted eyes.

"You-all wait here," he decided. "Chances are he kept right on up the broad wash."

He mounted one of the horses that had now arrived and rode at a lope to a point nearly half a mile west. There he dismounted and tied his horse to the ground. After rather a prolonged search he raised his hand over his head and described several small horizontal circles in the air.

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"Been in the army, have you?" muttered Buck, "well I will say you're a handy sort of leather-leg to have around. He gave the soldier signal for 'assemble'" he answered Jed Parker's question.

We rode over to join Curley.

"It's all right; he came this way," said the latter; but he did not trouble to show us indications. I am a pretty fair game trailer myself, but I could make out nothing.

We proceeded slowly, Curley afoot leading his horse. The direction continued to be toward Cockeye. Sometimes we could all see plain footprints; again the trail was, at least as far as I was concerned, a total loss. Three times we found blood, once in quite a splash. Occasionally even Curley was at fault for a few moments; but in general he moved forward at a rapid walk.

"This Curley person is all right," observed Windy Bill after a while, "I was brung up to find my way about, and I can puzzle out most anywhere a critter has gone and left a sign; but this yere Curley can track a humming bird acrost a granite boulder!"

After a little while Curley stopped for us to catch up.

"Seems to me no manner of doubt but what he's headed for Cockeye," he said, "There ain't no other place for him to go out this way. I reckon I can pick up enough of this trail just riding along. If we don't find no sign at Cockeye, we can just naturally back track and pick up where he turned off. We'll save time that-away, and he's had plenty of time to get thar and back again."

So Curley mounted and we rode on at a walk on the horse

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trail that led up the board shallow wash that came out of Cockeye.

Curley led, of course. Then rode Buck Johnson and Watkins and myself. I had horned in on general principles, and nobody kicked. I suppose they thought my general entanglement with this extraordinary series of events entitled me to more than was coming to me as ordinary cow-hand. For a long time we proceeded in silence. Then, as we neared the hills, Buck began to lay out his plan.

"When we come up on Cockeye," he was explaining, "I want you to take a half dozen men or so and throw around the other side on the other side on the Cochise trail——"

His speech was cut short by the sound of a rifle shot. The country was still flat, unsuited for concealment or defense. We were riding carelessly. A shivering shock ran through my frame and my horse plunged wildly. For an instant I thought I must be hit, then I saw that the bullet cut off clearly the horn of my saddle—within two inches of my stomach!

Surprise paralyzed us for the fraction of a second. Then we charged the rock pile from which the shot had come.

We found there Old Man Hooper seated in a pool of his own blood. He had been shot through the body and was dead. His rifle lay across a rock, trained carefully on the trail. How long he had sat there nursing the vindictive spark of his vitality nobody will ever know—certainly for some hours. And the shot delivered had taken from him the last flicker of life.

"By God, he was sure game!" Buck Johnson pronounced his epitaph.

CHAPTER XVIII

We cleaned up at the ranch and herded our prisoners together and rode back to Box Springs. The seven men who had been segregated from the rest by Buck Johnson were not among them. I never found out what had become of them nor who had executed whatever decrees had been pronounced against them. There at the home ranch we found Miss Amory very anxious, excited and interested. Buck and the others in authority left me to inform her of what had taken place.

I told you some time back that this is no love story; but I may as well let you in on the whole sequel to it, and get it off my chest. Windy's scheme brought immediate results. The partnership agreement was recorded, and after the usual legal red-tape Miss Amory came into the property. She had to have a foreman for the ranch; and hanged if she didn't pick on me! Think of that; me an ordinary forty-dollar cow puncher! I tried to tell her that it was all plumb foolishness, that running a big cattle ranch was a man sized job and took experience, but she wouldn't listen. Women are like that. She'd seen me blunder in and out of a series of adventures and she thought that settled it, that I was a great man. After arguing with her quite some time about it, I had to give in; so I spit on my hands and sailed in to do my little darndest. I expected the men who realized

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fully how little I knew about it all would call me a brash damn fool or anyway give me the horse laugh; but I fooled myself. They were mighty decent. Jed Parker or Sam Wooden or Windy Bill were always just happening by and roosting on the corral rails. Then if I listened to them—and I always did—I learned a heap about what I ought to do. Why, even Buck Johnson himself came and stayed at the ranch with me for over a week at the time of the fall round up: and he never went near the riding, but just projected around here and there looking over my works and ways. And in the evenings he would smoke and utter grave words of executive wisdom which I treasured and profited by.

If a man gives his whole mind to it, he learns practical things fast. Even a dumb-head Wop gets his English rapidly when he's where he has to talk that or nothing. Inside of three years I had that ranch paying, and paying big. It was due to my friends whom I had been afraid of: and I'm not ashamed to say so. There's Herefords on our range now, instead of that lot of heady long-horns Old Man Hooper used to run; and we're growing alfalfa and hay in quantity for fattening when they come in off the ranges. Got considerable hogs, too: and hogs are high—nothing but pure blood Poland. I figure I've added fully fifty per cent. if not more, to the value of the ranch as it came to me. No, I'm not bragging; I'm explaining how came it I married my wife and figured to keep myself respect. I'd have married her anyhow. We've been together now fifteen years, and I'm here to say that she's a hum-dinger of a girl, game as a badger, better looking every day, knows cattle

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and alfalfa and sunsets and sonatas and Poland hogs—but I said this was no love story, and it isn't!

The day following the taking of the ranch and the death of Old Man Hooper we put our prisoners on horses and started along with them toward the Mexican border. Just outside of Soda Springs whom should we meet up with but big Tom Thorne, the sheriff.

"Evenin', Buck," said he.

"Evenin'" replied the Señor.

"What you got here?"

"This is a little band of religious devotees fleein' persecution," said Buck.

"And what are you up to with them?" asked Thorne.

"We're protecting them out of Christian charity from the dangers of the road until they reach the Promised Land."

"I see," said Thorne, reflectively. "Whereabouts lays this Promised Land?"

"About sixty mile due south."

"You sure to get them all there safe and sound—I suppose you'd be willing to guarantee that nothing's going to happen to them, Buck?"

"I give my word on that, Tom."

"All right," said Thorne, evidently relieved. He threw his leg over the horn of his saddle. "How about that little dispossession matter, deputy? You ain't reported on that."

"It's all done and finished."

"Have any trouble?"

"Nary trouble," said Señor Buck Johnson blandly, "all went off quiet and serene."

THE END



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